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PhD Thesis

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NEW ITALIAN EPIC  
History, Journalism and the  
21<sup>st</sup> Century ‘Novel’

Italian Studies

School of Modern Languages and Cultures

University of Warwick

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## **~ DECLARATION ~**

This thesis is the candidate's own work except where it contains work based on collaborative research, in which case the nature and extent of the author's individual contribution shall be indicated. This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

## ~ ABSTRACT ~

This study examines the recent literary phenomenon known as the New Italian Epic, a label coined by Wu Ming 1 in a document called the Memorandum in 2008. Wu Ming 1 used the label New Italian Epic to describe a corpus of Italian texts, mainly published after the year 2000, that are an unusual mix of genres, styles and media, and that have a renewed sense of political and ethical commitment. After describing the phenomenon and outlining the main theoretical underpinnings to my analysis of it, I examine the Memorandum in detail, in order to individuate the ideas that will resurface throughout the study, related to postmodernism, new technologies, history and memory studies, epic, realism, and the role of literature in society. This is followed by a periodisation, which traces developments in recent history and literature that influenced the New Italian Epic phenomenon, including the Cannibal and migrant writers of the nineties, the violent events at the G8 protest in Genoa in 2001, and the political and cultural climate in Italy in the new millennium. I go on to analyse three key themes that particularly stand out in the New Italian Epic texts – the recurring theme of the death of the father, the use of the historical novel form, and texts that seem to be journalistic, but sometimes change or distort reality – each of which is accompanied by close reading of two or three novels from the New Italian Epic corpus, and compared to other previous or contemporary cultural developments in Italy and abroad. I conclude by considering the interactions between literature and film in the twenty-first century, and suggest that the ‘unidentified narrative objects’ we have seen throughout the study seem to be a particular product of our times.

## ~ INTRODUCTION ~

### Wu Ming and the New Italian Epic

The label New Italian Epic was first coined in 2008 by Wu Ming 1 in a document called the *Memorandum*,<sup>1</sup> which described a corpus of hybrid texts published in Italy mainly after the year 2000. Wu Ming 1 is the pseudonym of Roberto Bui, a member of the writing collective Wu Ming, which means in Mandarin alternatively ‘five names’, although since 2008 there have only been four members, or ‘anonymous’, used by Chinese dissidents desiring freedom of expression.<sup>2</sup> The Wu Ming Foundation initially started out under the auspices of the Luther Blissett Project, ‘a multi-use name, an “open reputation” informally adopted and shared by hundreds of artists and social activists all over Europe’.<sup>3</sup> As well as engaging in politically-motivated pranks, the future members of Wu Ming wrote the best-selling novel *Q* in 1999 using the name Luther Blissett, which marked the beginning of their literary career.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent novels were signed Wu Ming, and solo projects or collaborations with other authors saw the individual members using numbers rather than their proper names.

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<sup>1</sup> The name was chosen to indicate that these were initial, provisional ideas rather than a concrete manifesto (as I discuss in chapter one). The document first appeared online in April 2008, and then a second version appeared in September of the same year, with additional footnotes, an introduction and a postscript (see Wu Ming 1 2008a). The following year, another extended version became part of a book entitled *New Italian Epic. Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*, with a collective introduction by Wu Ming, alongside Wu Ming 1’s talk on the New Italian Epic and an essay by Wu Ming 2.

<sup>2</sup> Wu Ming 3 left the collective in 2008. See Wu Ming, ‘Wu Ming Foundation: Chi siamo, cosa facciamo’, *Giap*, <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/biografia.htm> (accessed 07.08.15). See also Baird 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.lutherblissett.net/>.

<sup>4</sup> Not coincidentally, *Q* is very much concerned with issues surrounding identity and authorship, from the mysterious character ‘Q’ of the title to the name-changing main protagonist, who could be seen as a reflection of Luther Blissett themselves as an identity-shifting entity that arranges protests and hoaxes, and engages with the subversive potential of the printing press.



This, combined with their refusal to appear on television or have their photographs taken, is part of Wu Ming's aim to undermine the figure of the author, both as a celebrated personality and as an isolated genius working alone, calling into question the modern author-function, as theorised by Foucault (2003).

This is reinforced by the fact that Wu Ming embrace 'copyleft' principles,<sup>5</sup> making their texts freely available for download online, as well as publishing in the traditional way. Their stories can be re-appropriated and re-elaborated by anyone, as shown by the spin-offs and soundtracks that have been created from their novels.<sup>6</sup> Foucault strongly linked the modern author-function to copyright laws, stating: 'The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning [...] he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction' (2003: 390). Wu Ming, by contrast, lend their texts to the proliferation of meaning and encourage such freedom with their fiction.

However, all of this is more of a nod towards such ideas than a true enactment of anonymity, as can be seen by their mainstream position on the Italian cultural scene. Their blog, *Giap*, is one of the most visited blogs in Italy,<sup>7</sup> and they bring out their books with Einaudi, a publishing giant that is both commercially successful and seen as the leading literary publisher in Italy, carrying notions of heritage and canonicity. Wu Ming's voices not only carry cultural currency, but are also becoming increasingly distinct from one another, as

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<sup>5</sup> This originated in computer programming, when programmes were put into the public domain uncopyrighted so that other programmers could improve them, then make the new versions available too (see <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/>) (accessed 07.08.15), but has now crossed over into sharing art.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Yo Yo Mundi wrote a soundtrack to *54* and *Q* was adapted for the stage (as Wu Ming 2 tells Jenkins 2006b).

<sup>7</sup> As pointed out by Patti (2014: Kindle location 616). See also <http://it.labs.teads.tv/top-blogs> (accessed 07.08.15).

seen by their numerous solo texts. Wu Ming 1's Memorandum on the New Italian Epic was widely read<sup>8</sup> and gained a large amount of public and critical attention. Contrary to Barthes, the author is alive and well even within this faceless collaboration.<sup>9</sup>

Besides writing historical novels that aim to rethink various points in time – whether the aftermath of the Second World War in *54* and *Asce di guerra*, the years leading up to the American Revolution in *Manituana*, 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe in *Q* and *Altai*, or the French Revolution in *L'Armata dei Sonnambuli* – this self-styled 'band di romanzieri'<sup>10</sup> try to engage with the wider public and expand their collaborative writing and political message beyond the pages of their texts. Their internet-based activities involve political campaigns, for example against the TAV (*treno di alta velocità*),<sup>11</sup> or protesting on Twitter against the power company Enel (see De Agostini 2013). They also review and discuss contemporary literature from Italy and elsewhere on *Giap*, and have initiated online literary projects through the blog, such as *La prima volta che ho visto i fascisti* in 2005, a collective narrative project on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Liberation of Italy. Beyond the infosphere, they have a punk-rock group called Wu Ming Contingent, give workshops on story-telling known as Wu Ming Lab, and travel round extensively promoting their books and doing readings.<sup>12</sup>

It was on *Giap* that Wu Ming 1 published his Memorandum on the New Italian Epic in April 2008, after having first used the label in a talk as part of a conference entitled *Up Close & Personal* at McGill University in Montreal the month before (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 10). The Memorandum detailed the various characteristics of the recent Italian texts that

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<sup>8</sup> It was downloaded approximately thirty thousand times within the first few months of appearing online (Wu Ming 2009a: x).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the tensions between individuality and collectivity in Wu Ming, see Medaglia and Willman 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Wu Ming, 'Wu Ming Foundation: Chi siamo, cosa facciamo', *Giap*, <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/biografia.htm> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>11</sup> See Wu Ming's No TAV archive on *Giap*, <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/?tag=no-tav> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>12</sup> For information on all of these activities, see their blog *Giap*, <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/>.

could be called New Italian Epic, a large and heterogeneous corpus, whose writers had a common belief in the power of literature to effect change in society by depicting and re-assessing the past and present. Some of these writers were already well-known and widely read both within and outside Italy, such as Saviano, whilst others were perhaps more marginal voices in contemporary literature, such as Muratori. Wu Ming 1 explained that the label was used not for the entire work of the writers in question, but for specific texts they had written with these particular characteristics, which may not be present in other texts by the same author. The writers whose texts form this nebula are part of the same ‘*generazione letteraria*’, as Wu Ming 1 put it (2009a: 11), and were (in theory) conditioned by a similar set of events, ranging from the political shake-up in Italy in the early nineties, developments in the publishing market, the political disillusionment and media control of the *ventennio berlusconiano*, and the advent of the Digital Age. These writers employ a range of genres including the historical novel, detective fiction, science fiction, investigative journalism and (auto)biography, often more than one within the same text. The resulting ‘unidentified narrative objects’ (2009a: 11) are often difficult to categorise or, in some cases, to distinguish as fact or fiction.

In an introduction to the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 stated that the name New Italian Epic was originally in English due to it being first used at the conference in Canada (2008b), although this feels like an unsatisfactory explanation for such a noticeable – and possibly controversial – choice. It could be seen related to marketing, as the English label packages recent Italian literature for an overseas audience, or it could be an acknowledgement of the transnational dimensions of these texts, despite the choice to also call them ‘Italian’. Wu Ming 1 has pointed out the various possibilities for interpretation that the English label offers, being more ambiguous than the Italian would be:

Si può vedere ‘epic’ come sostantivazione dell’aggettivo ‘epico’ riferito a ‘romanzo’, o a ‘tono’ (‘il nuovo tono epico italiano’), o a ‘filone’, ‘movimento’ etc. e quindi coniugare al maschile, come avviene con ‘il giallo’, ‘il noir’ etc.; oppure si può vederlo come un sostantivo (‘epic’ = epica), e quindi coniugare al femminile (*la New Italian Epic*). Nel saggio coniugo l’espressione al maschile, perché l’alternativa mi suona equivoca. Parlare, tout court, di ‘nuova epica italiana’ potrebbe far pensare che i libri presi in esame coprano ed esauriscano già tutte le possibilità della modalità epica oggi in Italia. Epperché mai porre limiti alla Provvidenza? (2008b).

Like the choice of an English label, the word ‘epic’ itself also contains both possibilities and drawbacks, as I will discuss in chapter one.

These texts warrant attention, given their negotiation of history and tradition, both building on what came before and taking literature in new directions. However, no book-length studies so far have addressed the New Italian Epic. Apart from a special issue of the *Journal of Romance Studies* in the spring of 2010, there have only been isolated articles on the subject peppered throughout various edited volumes (in particular Serkowska 2011, Somigli 2013, Jansen and Khamal 2014) or on the internet, primarily in the online journal *Carmilla*.<sup>13</sup> Some of the material related to the phenomenon, due to being on the internet, is ephemeral and at risk of disappearing, if it has not already disappeared, as in the case of the blog extension of Jones’ text *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*. Perhaps some of the online material I reference here will not be available in the future, but I hope to record this work surrounding the New Italian Epic in a more concrete way.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, although the

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<sup>13</sup> *Carmilla* (<http://www.carmillaonline.com/>) is a webzine that was founded by Evangelisti, who has edited it alongside Genna, De Michele and Wu Ming 1, all of whom are key New Italian Epic figures. Not only do they publish articles about contemporary literature and cinema, but they have also engaged with political issues, for example a campaign of solidarity with Cesare Battisti (see Evangelisti *et al* 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Where possible, I have saved the webpages I cite in the Wayback Machine Internet Archive: <http://archive.org/web/>.

Memorandum was an attempt to describe the current literary climate rather than a manifesto (as I discuss in chapter one), we will see that the concerns and common characteristics that Wu Ming 1 identified have continued to be explored by these and other writers since 2008, demonstrating the timely nature of his observations on changing approaches to literature in the new millennium.

### **Postmodern *Impegno***

The Memorandum appeared against the backdrop of anxieties that the figure of the public intellectual was disappearing in Italy (Cesarani 2009). Aside from limited attempts to curb Silvio Berlusconi's power within politics,<sup>15</sup> intellectuals had been seen as offering limited constructive reflection on, or solutions to, the recent situation. Some, such as Amato (2009) and Pardi (2008), argue that intellectuals have failed to engage with the majority of Italians, being unable to criticise the social situation in a meaningful way.<sup>16</sup> The latter states: 'nessuno è stato capace di contrapporre al nuovo sistema di valori una critica costruttiva, che non si limitasse cioè a deridere e disprezzare le masse rimbecillite dalla televisione ma fosse anche in grado di proporre modelli alternativi' (Pardi 2008). There has been a sense of nostalgia about a time when figures like Pasolini played a key role on the cultural scene, as Antonello has discussed in his 2012 text, *Dimenticare Pasolini*.<sup>17</sup> Yet, at the same time, the Memorandum was greeted with widespread controversy, with some questioning Wu Ming 1's

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<sup>15</sup> Not only did Berlusconi manage to come back into power in 2001, but as Ginsborg points out, the centre-left government of 1996-2001 failed 'to pass any law on the conflict of interests, or any law regulating the telecommunications sector' (2005: 190).

<sup>16</sup> For Amato (2009), the events at the G8 in Genoa, which I discuss in more detail in chapter two, particularly brought this to the fore: 'Fu chiara soprattutto la crisi profonda della figura dell'intellettuale, del tutto inabile a formulare programmi coerenti e aggiornati al mondo moderno'.

<sup>17</sup> Although Antonello argues that the presumed disappearance of the figure of the public intellectual can be seen positively as part of a democratisation of culture in the absence of paternalistic gate-keepers (2012: 13).

right to comment on literature as a critic, given that he was also a writer.<sup>18</sup> These debates were taking place alongside the much-repeated adage that Italy had more writers than readers, and fears that literature had been debased by overlaps between the book market and the mass media, becoming another source of meaningless entertainment rather than a serious pursuit, as espoused by Ferroni in *Scritture a perdere* (2010). This climate was reflected in another criticism that Wu Ming 1 received about the Memorandum, that is that some of the texts he was discussing were so-called *letteratura di genere* and therefore not ‘serious’ literature.<sup>19</sup> This criticism can be associated with a perennial debate about the quality of contemporary literature and the *romanzo medio* in Italy that goes at least as far back as Calvino, and what Benedetti described in *Pasolini contro Calvino* as a sense that literature had become colourless and ‘depotenziata’, simply obeying the demands of the culture industry (1998: 21). Such controversies resurfacing around the New Italian Epic provide a fascinating insight into the Italian cultural and literary scene from the twentieth into the twenty-first century.

These controversies can also be connected to the idea of a ‘*postmoderno nazionale*’ (Benedetti 1998: 21), that is the specificity of the way in which postmodernism has been received in Italy. In the twenty-first century, critics such as Luperini (2005) have argued that postmodernism has been taken to its logical extreme of self-referentiality and ironic playfulness, and that there is a need to go beyond it, as Boscolo framed an article about the

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<sup>18</sup> Wu Ming 1 refers to several examples of this criticism in ‘Reazioni *de panza*: 1a parte’ (2009c), including Giacomo Manfredi, who said in an interview: ‘Io penso che non tocchi agli scrittori definirsi. Gli scrittori raccontano’ (Andreotto 2008). This criticism seems surprising in the light of the praise given to Calvino’s *Lezioni americane* (1988), or Eco’s numerous critical works.

<sup>19</sup> This is clearly shown by the title of Rondolino’s article about the Memorandum in *La Stampa*: ‘Wu Ming se questa è letteratura’; he goes on to state: ‘La letteratura è l’insieme di tutti i mondi inventati dagli scrittori, e questi mondi - assai più delle stelle del cielo - influiscono sulle vicende della terra. In questo senso, la letteratura è più che semplice narrazione (diversamente dal giornalismo, non le basta una storia), ed è molto più che semplice intrattenimento (diversamente dalla narrativa di genere, non le basta un intreccio). Gli esempi di letteratura italiana contemporanea che il collettivo Wu Ming esalta in *New Italian Epic* [...] si concentrano invece, con convinta ingenuità, esclusivamente sulla narrazione e sull’intrattenimento. In altre parole, i prodotti della cultura di massa (o, con lieve slittamento, “popular culture”) diventano i protagonisti indiscussi, e a volte unici, della repubblica delle lettere’ (Rondolino 2009).

New Italian Epic: ‘Scardinare il postmoderno’ (2008). Wu Ming 1 also voices this view in the Memorandum, as we shall see. However, throughout this study, I underline the elements of continuity with twentieth century literary production, arguing that these texts do not represent a break with postmodernism, even if at times they digest it in a way distinct from their Italian predecessors. They also show that postmodernist features and political and ethical commitment are not mutually exclusive. A key reference point in this regard is Burns’ *Fragments of Impegno* (2001), which calls into question a monolithic understanding of political and ethical commitment in literature, and highlights changes in approach to this in the eighties and nineties, which many of these texts continue into the twenty-first century. Burns’ observation of a shift in those years ‘from an author-oriented towards a reader-oriented perspective’<sup>20</sup> has also continued to hold true, as we shall see in terms of the participatory aspects and the various interpretations invited by these authors, who may write under pseudonyms or as collectives.<sup>21</sup> Following on from this, Antonello and Mussnug’s argument that twenty-first century Italian literary, filmic and theatrical production can be seen as part of a postmodern *impegno* in their 2009 book of the same name is another cornerstone of my understanding of the New Italian Epic. I employ the term *impegno* in this study in the post-hegemonic sense as outlined by Antonello and Mussnug (2009: 9-11), referring to political and ethical engagement that is not connected to a particular agenda.

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<sup>20</sup> ‘One of the ways in which I think an ethical dimension finds a place in “postmodern” literature is by shifting from an author-oriented towards a reader-oriented perspective. This is not to assume that the author is dead: it is clear from my description above of the exchange which *impegno* assumes that I believe that the individual writer’s intention has some measure of influence. However, that a constant and identifiable subject uses writing as a means of creating a prescribable response is an inadequate description of the creative process (although the conventional perception of politically-committed literature perhaps rests on it). In adopting a position from which to write, a writer offers up a certain part of his consciousness, influenced (but not determined) by his own “interpretative community”. The interpretation of what is written depends on this author-function, but also on the position of the text (its language, form, the way it is published and marketed), and on the position of the reader, who, like the writer, can function in a variety of ways in this textual performance’ (Burns 2001: 6).

<sup>21</sup> Tommaso Pincio’s pseudonym is an homage to Thomas Pynchon. Aside from Wu Ming, Kai Zen and Scrittura industriale collettiva are other writing collectives associated with the phenomenon, and individual New Italian Epic writers have also collaborated with other writers on occasion (for example Carlotto and Mama Sabot 2008, Evangelisti and Moresco 2008, Philopat and Duka 2008).

Postmodernism has not finished, as some have maintained; it has simply changed form due to cultural and societal developments in recent years.

This insistence on postmodernism's demise is connected to the recurring theme of the death of the father, which is the subject of my third chapter, where I employ recent work by the Italian psychoanalyst Recalcati, as well as Brooks' earlier work on a Freudian interpretation of narrative in *Reading for the Plot*. Psychoanalytical ideas are also not out of place when considering, as I do in chapter five, the so-called 'ritorno alla realtà' that some have observed in recent years, as there seems to be a desire for return to some kind of authenticity associated with neo/realist/ic literature in contrast to what Wu Ming 1 has labelled 'Postmodernismi da quattro soldi' (2009a: 63), which could also be read as symptomatic of other deeper concerns about inheritance and responsibility. The corpus I analyse represents neither a rupture with postmodernism nor a return to an idea of *impegno* that we can associate with post-war neorealism, but rather a mixture of the two combined with new elements.

## **History and Memory**

Neumann has argued that literature illustrates and calls into question our understanding of how we remember the past, and states: 'literary fictions disseminate influential models of both individual and cultural memories as well as of the nature and functions of memory' (2010: 333). Certainly, the New Italian Epic texts give some indication of culturally prevalent concepts of history and memory. In recent years, the binary opposition between the two has broken down, as cultural memory studies have grown as an area of scholarly interest, and elements such as oral history have begun to be incorporated into



historical research, making it a more all-encompassing discipline. Erll has suggested ‘dissolving the useless opposition of history vs. memory in favour of a notion of different *modes of remembering* in culture [...] the past is not given, but must continually be re-constructed and re-presented’ (2010: 7). These modes of remembering are precisely what we shall see in chapter four in the historical novels of the New Italian Epic nebula. The reflections that these texts bring to the fore about different versions of the past is also part of a more specifically Italian tradition of blurring the lines between history and fiction, raising doubts and possibilities about the past. This can be dated back to the microhistorical approach to historical research set out by Ginzburg, as well as to Manzoni’s work in the nineteenth century, both his seminal historical novel *I promessi sposi* and his essay on combining historical fact and fiction, entitled ‘Del romanzo storico’, which Ginzburg (2006) would later draw on.<sup>22</sup> We will see these various elements reflected in the approach of the New Italian Epic writers to telling personal, individual accounts of the past against a wider backdrop of collective memory, whilst also interacting with archival documents to foreground the workings of history.

Not only have the lines between memory and history been increasingly blurred, but also those between original experience and the construction of memory. Memories are not necessarily attached to the person who experienced them, but can be transmitted to others as part of what Hirsh terms postmemory (1997, 2013). Different memories can also be joined together across time and space, what Rothberg has called multidirectional memory in his analysis of the ways in which Holocaust remembrance has interacted with the legacies of colonialism and slavery (2009). This is not dissimilar to what Silverman has called palimpsestic memory in terms of similar overlaps in remembrance in the Francophone

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<sup>22</sup> Ginzburg can also be seen as a reference point for these writers in his exposé of what he saw as a miscarriage of justice concerning the conviction of Adriano Sofri in *Il giudice e lo storico*, which I mention in chapter five.

context, describing the relationship between the present and past in the fiction and films he analyses as ‘a superimposition and interaction of different temporal traces to constitute a sort of composite structure, like a palimpsest, so that one layer of traces can be seen through, and is transformed by, another’ (2013: 3). The New Italian Epic texts likewise draw together different memories of historical events across the years and across national lines, often re-appropriating experiences that their writers did not witness first-hand, and suggesting connections with the present. Rothberg sees memory as ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative’ (2009: 3). The various possibilities for interpretation in the historical novels of the nebula and the echoes contained within them suggest that Rothberg is justified in seeing the productive potential of such multidirectional remembering.

Van Dijck states: ‘Memory is no longer what we remember it to be’ (2007: 182); she speaks in terms of the changes wrought by the digital age on memory and how it is mediated, changes that can also be detected in the contemporary literature I analyse here. New technologies mean that the ways in which we engage with our own history as well as with a wider understanding of History have changed, as access to archival documentation has led to more personal interaction with the past. As Derrida pointed out in ‘Archive Fever’: ‘The archivization produces as much as it records the event’ (1995: 17). Harris has described the changes in the archive with the advent of new technologies as follows:

With digital archives, we move beyond the physical repository or final resting place of a particular material object. In the digital archive, an object continues to acquire meaning based on users’ organization of the material (beyond editorial control of the primary architect), based on the continued re-mixing, re-using, and re-presentation of the object (2014: 17).

We can investigate our own family history on sites such as ancestry.com, or research events that are further removed from us, or we can communicate with one another about memories of a shared collective experience, as Hajek has explored in relation to commemoration of the *Movimento del '77* on Facebook (2014). However, Hoskins argues that the ‘unprecedented accessibility’ of digital data also makes it ‘more vulnerable to manipulation’ (2009: 102). Wu Ming have been involved in various online discussions about the manipulation of historical data, as seen in their campaign surrounding the falsified photographs of the *foibe* killings that repeatedly resurface and are shared on social media on the *Giorno del ricordo*,<sup>23</sup> or the collective known as Nicoletta Bourbaki, ‘un gruppo di inchiesta su Wikipedia e le manipolazioni storiche in rete’, formed after a discussion on Wu Ming’s blog *Giap* (Bourbaki 2014). Other risks posed by digital archives are the ephemerality and also the proliferation of the information held there, both of which could also mean that ‘its potential to be rediscovered in future times is very much reduced in comparison with the materiality of its hard-copy predecessors’ (Hoskins 2009: 102). Conversely, digital technologies can also disallow forgetting, resisting amnesia and preserving information and opinion in a way that may even subsequently prove problematic, as seen in the 2014 ‘Right to be Forgotten’ ruling by the European Union’s Court of Justice, which means that individuals can now request that search engines remove ‘inaccurate, inadequate, irrelevant or excessive’ information about them.<sup>24</sup> The ways in which memory operates in the twenty-first century are thus still being negotiated, and cannot be seen as purely positive or negative.

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<sup>23</sup> The *foibe* killings took place during and after the Second World War, and were mainly perpetrated by Yugoslav partisans against Italians in the regions close to the border with Yugoslavia, which is commemorated on the controversial *Giorno del ricordo*, established in 2004. For a summary of Wu Ming’s campaign against the circulation of falsified photographs online about the *foibe*, see Purini 2014.

<sup>24</sup> See the European Commission’s ‘Factsheet on the “Right to be Forgotten” ruling’, [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/files/factsheets/factsheet\\_data\\_protection\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/files/factsheets/factsheet_data_protection_en.pdf) (accessed 07.08.15). For an interesting discussion of the issues surrounding this ruling, see Toobin 2014.

A recent volume on transmediality edited by Brook and Patti (2014) shows the online environment to be a particularly interesting testing ground for ideas about history, politics and memory. The editors describe

un nuovo modello ibrido della Storia in cui – attraverso video, documenti, scritti vari, suoni – si mescolano storie private e personali con la Storia ufficiale e collettiva, storie visive e storie udite [...] E così le gerarchie vengono smentite. Quello che emerge dall'era digitale è una Storia parcellizzata e frammentata, versioni del passato che possono essere in conflitto, che emergono come da un libro dei ritagli. Nonostante ciò, dietro tutti questi cambiamenti, rimane sempre una nostalgia per la Storia – una Storia olistica e totale in cui tutto va ricordare, archiviato e raccontato. È ancora da stabilire con precisione cosa questa nuova Storia ci può insegnare (Brook and Patti 2014: Kindle locations 343-349).

Certainly, it is difficult to confirm what concrete changes have taken place in relation to these relatively new technologies, but we will see these re-configurations of history and History, remembering and forgetting, moving between the personal and collective, and piecing together fragments of the past in the texts of the nebula. They often literally resemble 'un libro di ritagli' in their inclusion of real or fabricated archival documentation, yet are simultaneously, as Wu Ming 2 put it in the title of a talk on his historical novel *Timira*, 'in search of narrative truth'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I am referring to a talk Wu Ming 2 gave at the University of Warwick on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2013, entitled 'The Historical Novel as a Means of Investigation: In Search of Narrative Truth' (event poster here: [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/ias/current/earlycareer/events/migration/wu\\_ming.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/current/earlycareer/events/migration/wu_ming.pdf)) (accessed 07.08.15).

## **Representing Reality in the Digital Age**

New technologies have played a role in the New Italian Epic not only from the point of view of changing ways of accessing the past. In Italy, ideas about the possibilities offered by the internet have taken on a particularly political hue, partly due to Berlusconi's monopoly over other media through his company Fininvest, as the internet has been seen as a place where alternative counter-narratives can circulate, as well as being the place where political movements like Beppe Grillo's M5S have grown up and been able to reach a wider public (as pointed out by Brook and Patti 2014: Kindle locations 302-314). On a global level, reporting the news also seems to have been influenced by the democratisation of technology, as it seems anyone can relay and comment on what is happening minute by minute on blogs and social network sites (SNSs), which have been seen as a way around the corporate control of telecommunications companies, run by figures such as Rupert Murdoch or Berlusconi. The highly personal approaches to investigative journalism that are the subject of chapter five would seem to reflect this more individual interaction with news stories.

However, we must not be too utopian when considering the possibilities offered by the internet, which some still have limited access to, and which is still at the mercy of larger forces. Goriunova and Bernardi point out when discussing SNSs, such as Twitter and Facebook: 'While SNSs clearly provide exciting new possibilities for the articulation of political concern and organization of political movements, as corporate and proprietary environments, they also become gray zones of distrust of the free and grassroots character of their products' (2014: 457). They give the example of a case that came to light in 2011 about the U. S. Army developing software to help them maintain credible social media profiles in different countries across the world to stir up action (Goriunova and Bernardi 2014: 457), and it is also worth remembering recent revelations about an experiment on Facebook that

manipulated the information on users' news feeds to make them feel happier or sadder through 'emotional contagion' (Kramer, Guillory and Hancock 2014).

Moreover, since the advent of both digital technologies and television, there have been concerns raised in Italy and elsewhere about the difficulties in experiencing and narrating reality in a highly mediated, hyperreal world, most notably by the French theorist Baudrillard (1994), and these concerns are also explored in the New Italian Epic nebula. They are at the heart of both the historical novels and the texts that address contemporary events using the tools of investigative journalism. There is an awareness among New Italian Epic writers of a need to help people process the huge amount of information they are bombarded with on a daily basis, putting themselves forwards as being able to 'read the world' (Amici 2010a: 10) for the general public through more literary approaches to this information overload. They express a common belief that their stories will help us reach a deeper understanding of their subject matter than the more superficial approach of the mass media. This dates back to the phenomenon of New Journalism in the sixties and seventies, as well as being part of a long Italian tradition of *inchieste*, as I explore in chapter five.<sup>26</sup> This belief in writers as privileged interpreters of reality can also be detected further afield in today's media landscape, as shown by the hugely successful podcast *Serial* in autumn 2014, in which the journalist Sarah Koenig unravelled a murder case calling on writerly psychological understanding and an attention to human details that the police or law courts seemed to be lacking.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I return again to Manzoni and this time his 'Storia della colonna infame', showing how his approach can later be detected in Sciascia's *L'affaire Moro*, Pasolini's 'Io so' and the New Italian Epic nebula.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://serialpodcast.org/>. The show was downloaded approximately 850,000 times each episode, and turned its listeners into detectives, sparking controversy around 'investigations' taking place on social media site Reddit (see Dean 2014).

Yet, the ‘truth’ that the New Italian Epic writers generally believe that they can help their readers access is not always a shared, empirically verifiable one. Mosca refers to ‘i diversi livelli di verità’ (2013: 165) in recent Italian literature, and Santoro talks about ‘una verità di secondo grado’ (2010: 29) in relation to the work of Siti. Siti’s *Troppi paradisi*, like others associated with the New Italian Epic - De Cataldo’s *Nelle mani giuste* (see chapter three), Jones’ *Sappiano le mie parole* (see chapter five) - includes an ‘Avvertenza’ at the beginning to underline the fictionality of this seemingly true account, calling the text ‘una autobiografia di fatti non accaduti’ (2006: 2). At the beginning of Scurati’s *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo*, which is about actual news stories, but also has a picture of the author as a child on the front cover and contains autobiographical elements, we are warned:

Questo romanzo appartiene al genere dei componimenti misti di cronaca e d’invenzione. Poiché ritiene che la vocazione della letteratura sia oggi, in un tempo dominato dalla cronaca, non già quella di confondere ulteriormente i confini tra realtà e finzione, bensì quella di superarli, l’autore invita il lettore a considerare ogni singola parola di questo libro come frutto della sua immaginazione, anche e soprattutto quando si narra di fatti riferiti a personaggi e a contesti che portano il nome di persone o di istituzioni realmente esistenti (2010).

Yet, whilst Bajani assures us in the ‘Avvertenza’ of *Ogni promessa*: ‘Si tratta di quella particolare forma di falsificazione della realtà che chiamiamo romanzo’ (2010), Genna gives his highly fantastical 2007 text, *Medium*, which I analyse in chapter three, the subtitle ‘una storia vera’ on its first page, and labels it ‘romanzo’ on his website.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, there are unusual configurations of fact and fiction in the ‘componimenti misti’ that make up the nebula, as their extra-diegetic apparatus often indicate. This is encapsulated by the epigraph

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<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.giugenna.com/wp-content/uploads/misc/medium.html> (accessed 07.08.15).

to Antar Mohamed and Wu Ming 2's *Timira*, which says: 'Questa è una storia vera... comprese le parti che non lo sono' (2012).

Such approaches can be traced back in the Italian tradition to Pasolini, who famously stated: 'Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore' (1974), or to Sciascia, who asserted: 'lo scrittore non è né un filosofo né uno storico, ma solo qualcuno che coglie *intuitivamente* la verità' (1979: 81). Again, this is also not limited to Italian literature. I find it useful when discussing this element of the New Italian Epic to refer to the Spanish writer Javier Cercas, whose text on the attempted coup in Spain in the early eighties, entitled *Anatomía de un instante* (*The Anatomy of a Moment*) (2009), mixes fact, fiction and autobiographical elements. He described it as 'a book where, ideally, historical truth illuminates literary truth, and where the outcome is neither of those truths, but a third truth taken from both and which somehow bridges between them' (Cercas 2011b). This third truth is what the texts discussed in this study are groping their way towards in different ways.

Questions of truth in the digital age are also present in the representations of the self in the New Italian Epic and beyond. From anonymous identities in chat rooms and on comments threads to 'managed' identities in social media profiles, we can now conceive of identity 'not only as a disembodied, fragmented and fluid phenomenon, untethered from the constraints of the human body, but also a constructed one, brought into being through people's representation of themselves online' (Doran 2014: 267). Alongside these developments, writers are called on more and more to use social media to maintain a public profile that their readers can 'follow' and 'like' and interact with as if they were friends, making literature more personalised than ever before. These changes may go some way towards explaining the recent surge of interest in experimentations with life writing from authors from across Europe and the western world: Karl Ove Knausgaard, W. G. Sebald,



Geoff Dyer, Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, Amélie Nothomb, Bret Easton Ellis, Ben Lerner and the aforementioned Cercas are just a few of a huge number of possible examples. Tellingly of this climate of a fascination with referentiality, the British writer Rachel Cusk said in a recent interview that she felt fiction was ‘fake and embarrassing. Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous’ (Kellaway 2014). More and more writers are openly drawing on their personal experiences for their literary output, although in the New Italian Epic this takes on a particularly political dimension. Wu Ming 1 says of Beppe Sebaste in *L'autista di Lady Diana* (2007): ‘usa introspezione e autofiction per narrare un fatto pubblico e “storico”’ (2009a: 15n). We will see this in many of the texts analysed in this study, as portrayals of the self have a wider community role in what could be seen as a rehabilitation of the personal as political.

However, the widespread use of autofiction should not necessarily be seen as part of what Shields has described as *Reality Hunger* in his 2010 book. This is not part of a ‘ritorno alla realtà’ as some Italian critics would have it (see chapter five), but rather these are experimentations with the porous boundaries between reality and fiction, between the fragmented and the constructed self in twenty-first century liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). This is precisely why I choose to use the term autofiction throughout this study, as opposed to describing these texts as autobiographical novels. Serge Doubrovsky, who first coined the term autofiction in the seventies, stated on the back cover of his 1999 autofictional *Laissé pour conte*:

À l'inverse de l'autobiographie, explicative et unifiante, qui veut ressaisir et dérouler les fils d'un destin, l'autofiction ne perçoit pas la vie comme un tout. Elle n'a affaire

qu'à des fragments disjoints, des morceaux d'existence brisés, un sujet morcelé qui ne coïncide pas avec lui-même (1999: back cover).<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, the fact that this term has existed for over forty years also suggests that, whilst the Internet Age may have crystallised some of the issues surrounding identity and brought them in new directions, this divided self is, once again, connected to an existing cultural climate too.

## Structure and Organisation

The New Italian Epic is not a genre, and I will not be treating it as such. Rather, as Wu Ming 1 illustrates (2009a: 10-14), it is a collection of texts that display comparable approaches to literature, history and contemporary reality, and I thus approach them individually as revelatory details. Sometimes, they do not resemble one another in many ways: they may have completely different styles – compare Saviano's political rhetoric to Bajani's understated domestic stories – or seem to address very much contrasting themes – ranging from the highly personal autofiction of writers like Siti or Jones, to Evangelisti's fantasy, sci-fi historical trilogy *Ciclo del metallo*. Wu Ming 1 stated on a comments thread about the New Italian Epic on the blog of another collective writing project, Scrittura industriale collettiva:

Preciso anche per me il new italian epic non è un genere, ma una sensibilità figlia di quest'epoca, i cui prodromi si vedono nel nostro paese fin dai primi anni Novanta.

Come potrebbe essere un genere, dal momento che le manifestazioni formali

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<sup>29</sup> 'As opposed to autobiography, which explains and unifies, which wants to get hold of and unravel the threads of a destiny, autofiction does not perceive life as a whole. It is only concerned with separate fragments, shattered pieces of existence, a divided subject that does not coincide with him or herself' (my translation).

divergono in modo tanto radicale? Sì, in comune c'è il livello allegorico profondo, ma di solito i generi non si raggruppano e definiscono in base a questo.<sup>30</sup>

He sees these texts as united by displaying signs of their time and a use of allegory, and this is certainly true, as we shall see.

In keeping with Wu Ming 1's assertion that the New Italian Epic is about "opere", non "autori" (2009a: 11), I base my analysis on individual texts by various writers, rather than giving an exhaustive analysis of a writer's entire body of work. Whilst each of the three thematic chapters contains a theoretical discussion of the theme identified, in order to base it within a (transnational) cultural climate and literary tradition, I then engage in close analysis of two or three texts that, I believe, best represent the key issues surrounding the theme in question from diverse perspectives. The corpus of the New Italian Epic is extensive; Wu Ming 1 mentions a large number of texts in his Memorandum, and, since it appeared in 2008, more texts in the same vein by the same writers have appeared – not to mention by other writers, which I mention in the '2008+' section in chapter two, but do not analyse in this study – all of which makes the material complex to navigate. The texts discussed here are all labelled New Italian Epic by Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum, with very few exceptions that have been indicated. Some of the writers and texts he discussed unfortunately receive little or no attention in this study, due to space constraints, or because they only make brief incursions into the main areas of interest that I identify. This does not intend to be an exhaustive study of every text in the nebula, but rather a survey picking out those that address the questions the phenomenon raises in the most interesting and revealing manner. My aim here is not to define whether a text is New Italian Epic or not, nor to rank or exclude texts based on how closely they adhere to Wu Ming 1's pronouncements in the Memorandum. Instead, I wish to give

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<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.scritturacollettiva.org/blog/new-italian-epic> (accessed 07.08.15).

more concrete illustration to a discussion that, as I have already mentioned, has been rather limited. A close reading of these texts may bring to light some interesting gaps between what Wu Ming or others have stated and how the texts work in practice, as well as suggesting further elements for consideration in this phenomenon.

Other texts are brought into each chapter too, and, where possible, I indicate examples of these themes being addressed in other national literatures, tending towards European and American literature due to my own familiarity with them, in order to underline my argument that the New Italian Epic is part of a more general shift in the western world, part of a wider evolution of the novel form that is linked to changing conditions in the twenty-first century. Yet, I also highlight the Italian literary tradition and political and social context that undoubtedly account for the peculiarities of these texts. By illustrating the transnational elements of these writers' approach to literature and their subject matter whilst also not ignoring the specificities of Italian culture, I seek to create links between the local, the national and the global, engaging in local inquiry but, equally, showing that the conditions for the New Italian Epic did not happen in a vacuum.

The first chapter is an analysis of Wu Ming 1's Memorandum to outline the key themes that will be the subject of the rest of this study, creating a framework for further discussion of the phenomenon. I treat the Memorandum as a primary text in itself, engaging, where possible, in a close reading of the document. This raises the key issues surrounding the nebula and shows the New Italian Epic's stylistic approach in action, as well as highlighting the tensions and gaps in what could be seen as a crypto-manifesto.

The second chapter addresses the question of periodisation, oriented around the three key dates that Wu Ming 1 individuates: 1993, 2001 and 2008, although other key moments and experiences that are omitted from discussions of the New Italian Epic are added to these.

I discuss a wide range of texts both from outside the phenomenon – migrant writing and the so-called Cannibal writers of the nineties – and from the nebula – with examples from writers such as Philopat, Carlotto and De Michele, with particular focus on the latter's *La visione del cieco*. I call into question Wu Ming 1's tendency to try to create a common generational narrative for the New Italian Epic writers based around the watershed moment of the G8 in Genoa, which was an ambiguous and fragmented experience, as indicated by the texts of the nebula that portray it. The final section of this chapter is an assessment of where the New Italian Epic is now, today.

The periodisation of the phenomenon is geared towards proving the newness of the New Italian Epic, as a fresh start in literature, which is related to the recurring theme of the death of the father, the focus of my third chapter. I discuss this theme in relation to ideas surrounding the end of the First Republic, postmodernism and psychoanalytical ideas about modern-day society. The first texts I examine in detail are Genna's autofictional representations of the death of his real-life father from two contrasting perspectives in *Medium* and *Italia De Profundis*. In both cases, his mourning is bound up with the state of Italy today, firstly through a fantastical re-imagining of his father's communist past, then through his own experiences drawing on the work of literary 'fathers' such as Pasolini and David Foster Wallace. I then turn to a very different manifestation of this theme in the figure of 'il Grande Vecchio' who has haunted various recent Italian texts, most memorably De Cataldo's *Romanzo criminale* and *Nelle mani giuste*. The latter forms the basis of my analysis, as it portrays the problems surrounding the political turmoil in the early nineties, the ascent to power of Berlusconi and the need to take responsibility for the new Italy of the Second Republic that are at the forefront of the New Italian Epic. I conclude by suggesting that a move away from purely fatherhood when considering these issues opens up some fascinating new lines of enquiry for the future.

Questions of inheritance and responsibility are also bound up with the use of the historical novel form, the subject of chapter four, as these texts are also ways of coming to terms with the past. The two main strands of historical novels that exist in the nebula are represented in this chapter by Scurati's *Una storia romantica* about the Risorgimento, which, like others in this strand, attempts to re-think the collective memory of a mythologised moment in national history, and Mohamed and Wu Ming 2's *Timira*, which, conversely, works towards uncovering a largely forgotten or disavowed element of national history, that is, Italian colonialism. I link these two strands to Ginzburg's microhistorical approach, as well as situating it within the historical novel tradition that dates back to Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* and his problematising of historical knowledge in his essay 'Del romanzo storico'. In many ways, the New Italian Epic writers are seeking to answer similar questions to their nineteenth century precursor: how can we approach and combine history and fiction?

The interplay between fiction and nonfiction is also the concern of those New Italian Epic writers who describe more recent events in a journalistic mode, which I analyse in chapter five, centring around the work of Saviano and Jones. Whilst Saviano's *Gomorra* about the Neapolitan mafia known as the Camorra purports to be truthful, the use of real events is as blurred and problematic as in Jones' *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* about the Balkans conflict, even if Jones is more overt about the role of fictionalising in her narrative. In this chapter, I call into question the supposed 'ritorno alla realtà' that some critics have observed in twenty-first century Italian literary production by bringing out the ambiguities surrounding the approach to reality in these texts.

I chose these three themes – paternity, history and the so-called 'new realism' – partly because they re-surface most frequently within the New Italian Epic corpus, but also because they are bound together by a similar desire for an imagined, impossible authenticity or truth,

and contain combinations of tradition and innovation that typify the New Italian Epic. There were other themes that I could have chosen, but that are more marginal, such as the depiction of dystopian futures, as seen in the sections of Evangelisti's *Black Flag* that are set in the year 3000, Pugno's *Sirene*,<sup>31</sup> and Wu Ming 5's *Free Karma Food*, or the use of fantasy, as seen again in the work of Evangelisti, and also Chiara Palazzolo and Alan D. Altieri, for example. I did not choose to analyse recent Italian *noir* because it has been addressed comprehensively elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> although *noir*-ish elements are present in some of the texts in the present study by De Michele, De Cataldo and Saviano. There were also other strands within the themes I have identified that could have been explored, which I identify within the relevant chapters, but which I give only limited space to, as they are more minor bifurcations on the key paths of the New Italian Epic.

My contention is that New Italian Epic is not the most effective label to describe this phenomenon. The phenomenon is not wholly new: despite incorporating novel elements, it is the product of an Italian literary tradition going back to the postmodern predecessors they may have attempted to shrug off, as well as to earlier *impegnati* writers, and can even be traced back into the nineteenth century. Moreover, the 'Italian' label is problematic, given the unstable nature of Italian-ness itself, and the presence of similar themes and approaches in contemporary literature from other countries. Finally, whilst some of these texts can be seen as displaying epic qualities, the myriad ways in which these authors express their social and political messages cover a wide variety of genres, tones and styles, as we shall see throughout

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<sup>31</sup> There has been some controversy surrounding whether Pugno's text can be seen as part of the nebula, as debated by Wu Ming 1 and Lorenzo Mari in *Tabard* (see the article by Mari 2008 and its comments thread), but Jansen's reading of the text rightly points out that Pugno's poetics are more similar to those put forward in the Memorandum than this debate acknowledges (2010: 105-6), and Rushing too has rightly argued that '*Sirene* is an excellent exemplar of the New Italian Epic' (2011: 5).

<sup>32</sup> See in particular the volumes *Memoria in Noir. Un'indagine pluridisciplinare* (Jansen and Khamal 2014) and *Roma Noir 2010. Scritture nere: narrativa di genere, New Italian Epic o post-noir?* (Mondello 2010b). See also Di Ciolla 2012, Mondello 2010a and Pieri 2009, 2011. There are similar concerns at stake in the New Italian Epic *noir* texts as there are in others of the nebula, as they also use the tools of literature to explore the past and present, merge real events and fiction, and use an investigative mode to explore political and ethical issues.

this study. Consequently, I find Wu Ming 1's label of 'unidentified narrative objects' more apposite for describing these texts, and it can also be applied to their counterparts beyond Italy's borders.

That is not to say that the nebula is an artificial grouping together of contemporary texts. On the contrary, the family resemblances that Wu Ming 1 brought to the fore in his Memorandum are present, they simply take different forms depending on the writers in question. My choice of texts not written by Wu Ming as a collective as principle objects of analysis is a deliberate one, as their texts tend to more completely encompass all of the elements mentioned in the Memorandum, and are perhaps the most epic of the New Italian Epic corpus. What I instead seek to demonstrate is that, while the others may not adhere to all of the characteristics suggested by this label, they can be seen as a constellation of similar ideas that, despite incorporating previous experiences, express a moment in time and a new stage of development of the novel form, both within Italy and elsewhere.



## **~ CHAPTER ONE ~**

### **‘Nelle lettere italiane sta accadendo qualcosa’**

#### **The Memorandum on the New Italian Epic**

The Memorandum on the New Italian Epic, written by Wu Ming 1, first appeared online in April 2008. By September of the same year, the document had already been downloaded approximately thirty thousand times (Wu Ming 2009a: x) and had received a large amount of attention from the public. It stated that certain hybrid texts published in Italy, mainly since 2000, were part of a new phenomenon in Italian literature that experimented with new and unusual elements to raise social and political issues. The document begins with Wu Ming 1's explanation of how he coined the name New Italian Epic, justifying the different aspects this choice of name involved and giving a large number of examples of texts, or 'unidentified narrative objects' (2009a: 41), that can be included in the phenomenon. He then lists the seven main characteristics of these texts – ranging from having an oblique gaze on their subject matter to telling alternative (his)stories – and, finally, reflects on the urgent need for such narratives in today's world: 'Oggi arte e letteratura non possono limitarsi a suonare allarmi tardivi: devono aiutarci a immaginare vie d'uscita' (2009a: 60).

The issues Wu Ming 1 discusses in the Memorandum are both briefly developed and wide-ranging; he intended them to be the beginning of a debate aimed at a wide audience of internet users. It was called a Memorandum to show that he was attempting to note down the terms of a question, 'stimolando, con idee e pensieri nuovi, il cammino della discussione' (Wu Ming 2009a: xiii). By publishing it online, readers could leave comments and interact

with what was being said. This sense of participation was reinforced by the fact that the original document was edited and supplemented several times in reaction to the numerous responses it had received. The ‘Memorandum Versione 2.0’ appeared in September 2008, complete with footnotes and a ‘Postilla’ to develop or clarify certain points, or to refer to further reading, often online. It also contained corrections, including a sentence that is crossed out and justified in a footnote (Wu Ming 1 2008a: 27). The following year, a third extended version was published in a book entitled *New Italian Epic. Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*.<sup>33</sup> Despite the main body being written by Wu Ming 1, the print version of the Memorandum was supplemented by an introduction by Wu Ming collectively, Wu Ming 1’s speech ‘Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori’, Wu Ming 2’s essay ‘La salvezza di Euridice’, as well as Wu Ming 1’s expansions on the original Memorandum gathered in a new section entitled ‘Sentimiento nuevo’. Significantly, the book of the Memorandum is attributed to Wu Ming as a whole, despite the various sections being individually authored, giving an impression of collaborative work. Wu Ming 1 also underlines the role of collaboration in clarifying his ideas about recent Italian literature near the beginning of the text, where he documents the move from the initial provisional theories that had occurred to him to the experiences of presenting them at the University of Montreal, Middlebury College and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he accumulated more examples and constructive input from others (10). This suggests that these ideas are shared property, as does the fact that the ‘Memorandum Versione 2.0’ can be freely downloaded. Like the texts of other New Italian Epic writers who have embraced the ‘copyleft’ movement,<sup>34</sup> the information becomes part of collective knowledge and does not belong to any one person.

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<sup>33</sup> Unless otherwise stated, references to Wu Ming 1’s Memorandum in this chapter will come from this text, as it is the most complete, and page numbers will be given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>34</sup> Luther Blissett/Wu Ming, Kai Zen, De Michele and Genna have made some or all of their texts freely available online.

Throughout its genesis, the Memorandum attracted both praise and criticism. Wu Ming 1 gives a summary of some of the negative reactions in a blog post entitled ‘Reazioni *de panza*: 1a parte’, including accusations that Wu Ming were simply marketers seeking to sell books (including their own), that the New Italian Epic texts were *letteratura di genere* and not ‘serious’ literature, or that writers should not behave as critics (Wu Ming 1 2009c). Certain opponents even started a boycott campaign that invited people to hide the print version of the Memorandum under piles of other books in bookshops, showing that these theories clearly struck a nerve with certain sections of the public (Wu Ming 1 2010b). As Wu Ming state: ‘since 2008, no discussion of the current state of Italian literature has been possible without references – either positive or negative – to what we wrote. They just couldn’t ignore the “memorandum”’ (2010). Although some of the controversy surrounding the Memorandum was more indicative of issues related to the Italian cultural scene, which tends towards conservatism,<sup>35</sup> the Memorandum is also open to some of the criticism that has been levelled at it. It contains interesting tensions between the words of Wu Ming 1 and the reality both of the current literary market and of the New Italian Epic texts, although I will argue in this chapter that Wu Ming 1 was aware of these tensions.

He has always stressed that the Memorandum was not a manifesto, stating in the first lines of his foreword to ‘Versione 2.0’ in emphatic italics: ‘*Memorandum. Sintesi provvisoria. Primo tentativo*’ (2008a: 1). However, in many ways it could be seen as a crypto-manifesto. By outlining the shared characteristics between these texts, he creates a group, a ‘generazione letteraria’ (11) that is distinguished from what came before, aligning

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<sup>35</sup> This can be seen partly in the criticism that the Memorandum was not discussing ‘real’ literature, as espoused, for example, by Rondolino (2009). Ceserani, in his article ‘La maledizione degli “ismi”’, states: ‘chi ha lavorato e lavora nel campo degli studi letterari in Italia, a differenza di quanto è avvenuto in altri paesi o in altri campi, come quelli della sperimentazione artistica e della progettazione architettonica, si sia quasi sempre schierato dalla parte della conservazione, dello sdegno moralistico, della cecità ideologica o della nostalgia seriosa e immalinconita’ (2012: 204). As we shall see in terms of debates surrounding postmodernism and realism in Italy, this observation applies.

writers in a way that resembles a literary movement. Wu Ming 1's tone and the ideas he puts forward have a utopian ring about them that we might associate with a manifesto: literature can be used to change society; literature is still at the centre of culture despite technological developments. Despite the emphasis on participation and the democracy of literature that Wu Ming 1 discusses in the Memorandum and also attempts to enact by being part of a writing collective, he puts himself forward as the spokesperson for this literary phenomenon. Although these narrative objects are called unidentified, there are many attempts to identify them here.

However, Wu Ming 1 does not *prescribe* but *describe* what is, and has already been, happening in Italian literature. He says he is creating links that had either been ignored or taken for granted between texts in dialogue with one another, which he refers to as a nebula to give a sense that they are loosely gathered together like particles in a cloud, rather than a school of authors who have actively grouped together to form a movement: 'Eccoli, dal centro dalla nebulosa già ripartono, volano in ordine sparso, le traiettorie divergono, s'incrociano, divergono...' (14). As Jossa rightly said of the Memorandum: 'D'accordo o non d'accordo, New Italian Epic merita un supplemento d'indagine, come proposta operativa anziché come manifesto ideologico' (2009). If we take the Memorandum to be a starting point, albeit one with contradictions and omissions, it is a valuable document for exploring the Italian literary scene in the first decade of the new millennium.

In this chapter, I will give an overview of the key concepts outlined in the Memorandum, combining elaborations by Wu Ming collectively and individually, as well as by other writers. I will treat the Memorandum as a primary text, as it is an unidentified object in itself. Wu Ming 1 tells us in the introduction to 'Versione 2.0' in a parenthetical aside: 'Scrivo queste frasi un romanzo un racconto, sto narrando' (2008a: 2). This is certainly not a

straight-forward piece of academic criticism; like other textual objects in the nebula, it is an unusual hybrid that does not easily fit into existing definitions. Subsequent chapters will be based around the themes discussed here, developing them in more detail and examining individual texts from the nebula to show them in action. This chapter is thus a brief exploration of the threads that will later be followed, and it is divided into the three elements that constitute the phenomenon's name: its newness in relation to previous literary experiences and the Digital Era, its Italian-ness seen through the lens of its historical and social context but also placed within a wider transnational landscape, and finally the implications of describing these texts as epic.

## **New**

When discussing New Journalism, Tom Wolfe said: 'Any movement, group, party, program, philosophy or theory that goes under a name with "New" in it is just begging for trouble. The garbage bag of history is already full of them' (1975: 37). Certainly there are problems surrounding Wu Ming 1's choice of this adjective for the New Italian Epic. The label of 'new Italian narrative' began to be used in the eighties to refer to 'an eclectic and varied production where the growth of readerships has been accompanied by the numbers of new writers who have brought with them unfamiliar cultures, backgrounds and experiences' (Ania and Caesar 2007: 2). In the nineties, it was connected with the young writers in the anthology *Italiana. Antologia dei nuovi narratori* (Franchini and Parazzoli 1996), and it was also used in the name of a critical text, *The New Italian Novel* (Barański and Pertile 1993), which analysed the work of writers such as Andrea De Carlo, Gianni Celati and Vincenzo Consolo, as well as later being applied to the Cannibal writers, for example in *Italian Pulp Fiction. The New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers* (Lucamante 2001a). Wu Ming 1

presents the New Italian Epic as distinct from experiences like these, although we will see that there is some overlap with these various ‘new’ literary experiences, as well as with others that Wu Ming 1 tries to distance these contemporary texts from.

The putative newness of the New Italian Epic phenomenon is very much tied up with generational issues. The failings of the generation before them and of Berlusconi’s Italy have been seen as galvanising these writers into action; Wu Ming 1 claims that there has been a realisation that they needed to metaphorically grow up and become the founders, or parents, of a new Italy. In the Memorandum, he links what has been happening on the Italian political, social and cultural scene with the recurring theme of ‘la morte del Vecchio’ (74) in the texts of the nebula, which I analyse in detail in chapter three. This generation defines itself in relation to what came before, leaving a sense of emptiness in being always post-something, even posthumous: ‘post-fascisti, post-comunisti, post-postmoderni, Seconda Repubblica, eccetera’ (74). As a result, the theme of absent or dead progenitors is both literally and metaphorically present in many New Italian Epic texts. Wu Ming 1 argues that this generation needs to stop thinking of itself as ‘*problem children*’ (2010c), and writers need to start taking a stance on social issues through literature: ‘Immaginando storie alternative, curano i difetti del nostro sguardo di postumi e ci preparano a immaginare un futuro’ (2008c).

The feeling of being orphans is very much connected to what Wu Ming 1 sees as the shortcomings of late-twentieth century postmodernist literary production, which he feels shied away from shouldering this responsibility after the metaphorical death of the various ‘fathers’ we will encounter in chapter three, although his approach to postmodernism suffers from being simplistic. In his talk on the New Italian Epic included in the print version of the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 quotes the American writer David Foster Wallace, who significantly used a parent-child analogy to describe the latter stages of postmodernism.

Wallace saw this period as reminiscent of being a high-school student throwing a wild party when your parents are away, then wishing they would come back and restore order:

It's not a perfect analogy, but the sense I get of my generation of writers and intellectuals or whatever is that it's 3:00 A.M. and the couch has several burn-holes and somebody's thrown up in the umbrella stand and we're wishing the revel would end. The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back - I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually need? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back - which means we're going to have to be the parents (McCaffery 1993: 150).

Wu Ming 1 called his talk 'Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori' after Wallace, signalling the crucial position of the orphan metaphor in the New Italian Epic taxonomy. He argues that the New Italian Epic is in contrast to what he calls 'Postmodernismi da quattro soldi' (63), a term which he particularly applies to late postmodernist writing. Whilst he admits there are exceptions to the rule,<sup>36</sup> he maintains that late twentieth century literature was frequently characterised by self-referentiality and cold irony, and the creative act stopped being seen as one of renewal and liberation (64). For him, postmodernism died on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 (66), and, since then, the New Italian Epic writers have been stepping up to attempt to become the new parents of Italy.

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<sup>36</sup> Wu Ming 1 concedes that DeLillo, Pynchon and Doctorow escape this definition of postmodernism, but also states: 'Nemmeno *due o tre* rondini [...] fanno primavera' (66).

Such an attitude to postmodernism has been espoused by critics such as Donnarumma (2003) and Luperini (2005), who have tended to reduce the concept to what Re describes as ‘the alleged triumph of shallowness and disengagement, an ironic, playful and sceptical attitude, loss of any faith in the possibility of an accurate or coherent representation or rendering of reality, epistemic nihilism, and apathetic surrender to the ruthless rules of consumer capitalism’ (2014: 101). Jansen has explored the difficult reception of postmodernism in Italy, which, in contrast to the American postmodernist attitude of ‘anything goes’, manifested itself instead more as a rejection of literature as a useless and self-referential game (2002: 239). Such artistic production is often associated with Calvino’s later work, and placed in artificial opposition with a Pasolinian ‘realism’ – most notably by Benedetti (1998) – and, indeed, realism is another term which has been the subject to certain misconceptions, as shown by the recent debate started in the journal *Allegoria* on an alleged ‘ritorno alla realtà’ in Italian literature after 9/11 (see chapter five). Wu Ming 1 seems to fall victim to this more general tendency to misconstrue postmodernist experimentalism as being disengaged from reality and to propose that postmodernism has now ended as we enter a new historical and cultural phase. The fact that the main body of the Memorandum opens and closes with quotes from T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* – and the presence of Eliot as a reference elsewhere in New Italian Epic texts<sup>37</sup> – also suggests that the ideas of Wu Ming 1 and some other New Italian Epic writers align with those of critics like Luperini, who has observed a return to elements of modernism in recent years to search for answers to contemporary issues (2005: 13). Storini also raises the pertinent point that Wu Ming 1’s description of postmodernist literature recalls a Sausurrean approach to language (2010: 82), as seen particularly in his description in the Memorandum of ‘un mondo dove il linguaggio rimanda

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<sup>37</sup> Eliot is listed as one of Genna’s literary role models in *Italia De Profundis* (see chapter three), and a quote from his *Four Quartets* appears at the beginning of Magini and Santoni’s article ‘Verso il realismo liquido’ (2008), which I discuss later in this chapter. He is also referenced by Jones (see chapter five).



sempre e ossessivamente a se stesso, i segni rimandano sempre e solo ad altri segni [...] fino all'apologia dell'indecidibilità, dell'ineffabilità, dell'assenza di qualunque senso' (66). The allusion to Saussure, whose theories eventually led to poststructuralism and deconstruction, gives an indication of the tendency in Italy to reduce postmodernism to certain schools of thought, mainly based on the work of French theorists, rather than allowing for wider and more politically committed interpretations of the ontological doubt it ushered in.<sup>38</sup>

As Burns (2001) has demonstrated, a sense of political and ethical commitment was not absent in Italian literature in the latter decades of the twentieth century, it simply became more fragmentary rather than adhering to a collective monolithic project. It is also difficult to see a radical break with postmodernism stemming from 9/11, given that many of the concerns of postmodernist writing, such as a mistrust of a traditional power and universal values, and a tendency towards openness leaving the reader to interpret the texts, are present in the New Italian Epic too. Antonello and Mussgnug rightly point out that attempts to rebrand postmodernism do not address the underlying similarities between the concepts of postmodernism and current literary production (2009: 5). Whether this era is 'post-postmodernist' or, as Wu Ming 1 says, 'non ha ancora un'etichetta' (68), it is not one of complete rupture with postmodernism, which Wu Ming 1 does not fully address. There is both continuity with twentieth-century postmodernism and innovation in the New Italian Epic.

Certainly, the New Italian Epic could be seen as signalling a more overt and less fragmentary approach to engagement with national issues. Wu Ming 1 places the idea of

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<sup>38</sup> See for example Donnarumma's 2008 text *Da lontano. Calvino, la semiologia e lo strutturalismo*, which Re sums up as 'seeking to demonstrate that in his prose Calvino essentially did nothing but passively follow the dictates of Propp's and Roland Barthes' narratology' (2014: 101n). It is the Derridean view that there is nothing outside the text that Ferraris takes issue with when formulating his theory of new realism (2015: 6-7), although he also underlines his background in deconstruction and the hermeneutics of suspicion, arguing that 'new realism is intrinsically deconstructive' (2015: 9).

engagement at the top of his list of characteristics of the New Italian Epic in the Memorandum, defining it employing English slang – ‘Don’t keep it cool-and-dry’ (22) – perhaps as a nod to pop culture, or perhaps to distance it from the Italian tradition of *impegno* and underline its newness. He tells us that these recent writers wish to re-engage with the masses by combining narrative complexity with what he calls ‘*attitudine popolare*’ (32). The New Italian Epic writers recognise that ‘il pubblico è più intelligente di quanto siamo disposti a riconoscere’ (32), and that popular culture is not simply something to be demonised, but elements of it, including new technologies and the tools of genre fiction,<sup>39</sup> can contribute to the overall effect of these texts and help them to connect meaningfully with the reading public (32-33). It is this that Wu Ming 1 seeks to do in the Memorandum too, acting as the writer as social commentator and ethically committed intellectual reaching out to a wide audience of internet users, with complex ideas expressed in an accessible way. By doing so, the New Italian Epic aims to combat the limited versions of the truth about Italy’s present and past to search for a new truth through literature that is available to everybody.

This co-presence of high and low cultural elements can be seen in the Memorandum itself, which, despite addressing serious, often academic, points and including technical language, has a conversational tone, at times becoming extremely informal. This orality is present immediately from its opening as a sort of reminiscence: ‘Nel pomeriggio dell’11 settembre 2001 lavoravamo a casa di Wu Ming 2’ (5). Later, Wu Ming 2’s voice intervenes in the main section in a conversational and immediate way: ‘Wu Ming 2 è qui, accanto a me, e chiede la parola’ (36). At times, it displays a humorous theatricality in order to explain the points being made that is certainly not typical of literary criticism: “‘Ehi, cos’è quello? È un

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<sup>39</sup> A frequent form used by the New Italian Epic writers is that of the detective novel, or at least an investigatory mode staged around a search for some kind of truth. They also sometimes employ the characteristics of *noir* in the depiction of their subject matter, drawing on recognisable traditions of genre fiction but resulting in something that defies categorisation. This relates to the Italian tradition of the ‘*inchiesta*’ novel, as practised by Sciascia, another enduring influence on these writers who addressed Italian political issues through his *gialli*.

uccello? No, è un aereo! No, un momento... È Superman!” Assolutamente no. È un oggetto narrativo non-identificato’ (41). This allusion to Superman is just one example of a reference to pop culture in the Memorandum – *Scary Movie* (65), Tom Cruise (66), *L.A. Confidential* (86), Buffy the Vampire Slayer (137) are also mentioned, to name a few – but these are combined with ‘highbrow’ allusions to literature and theorists, such as Benjamin or Deleuze,<sup>40</sup> who are referenced but not analysed with in-depth academic rigour, which undoubtedly provoked at least some of the opposition that the Memorandum received, with, for example, Ceserani calling it ‘[un] dilettantesco manifesto’ (2012: 212). The print volume does not have an index, making it difficult to navigate for readers who want to do more than read it on a superficial level. These elements are a corollary of Wu Ming 1’s desire that this discussion was not seen purely as the territory of intellectuals, but as relevant to the whole of society. Wu Ming 1 irreverently states that they are not interested in being accepted into ‘qualche parnaso di stronzi’ (96), a particularly informal use of language to make his point. Like other New Italian Epic texts, the Memorandum tends to combine diverse registers, although some of these elements cloud the message that Wu Ming 1 is trying to communicate.

This combination of high and low culture would also seem to further call into question the New Italian Epic’s rejection of postmodernism, which Jameson described as a ‘cultural mutation, in which what used to be stigmatized as mass or commercial culture is now received into the precincts of a new and enlarged cultural realm’ (1991: 64). This is what

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<sup>40</sup> I return to Benjamin later in this chapter. Wu Ming 1 briefly alludes to Deleuze in the Memorandum, stating that these texts often use the neorealist technique of ‘la forma-passeggiata’ (77), which for Deleuze was associated with the development of time-image films, in which the characters were found ‘in a state of strolling, of sauntering or of rambling [...] letting any-spaces-whatever rise up where the modern affects of fear, detachment, but also freshness, extreme speed and interminable waiting were developing’ (Deleuze 2005: 124). Again, this reference seems to suggest a desire to return to a previous era, when, like these writers today, film-makers were searching for ‘a new type of tale [*récit*] capable of including the elliptical and the unorganised, as if the cinema had to begin again from zero’ (Deleuze 1989: 216). Neorealism is also referenced in relation to the ‘return to realism’ that I discuss in chapter five.

Benedetti argued that Italian postmodernist writers did not do to the same extent as their American counterparts:

La narrazione postmoderna in Italia non ha avuto un'altrettanta capacità di rapportarsi alla vita contemporanea nei suoi aspetti più spaesanti negativi. Da noi sembra aver attecchito maggiormente l'altra anima del postmoderno, quella ironico-necrofila, ripiegata sui meccanismi autoriflessivi della scrittura, capace sì di costruire spazi di finzione o di metafinzione, ma chiusi in un labirinto intertestuale, nello spazio ora malinconico ora euforico, ma pur sempre rassicurante di un mondo tutto letterario (1998: 57).

It could be said that the way in which New Italian Epic writers embrace the more popular elements of contemporary life means that they approach a version of postmodernism associated with American writers, or a more transnational postmodernism than that associated with late twentieth century Italian literary production, although, as mentioned above, there are limitations to Benedetti's characterisation of Italian postmodernism. Aside from Wallace, William S. Burroughs resurfaces in the nebula as an important reference point,<sup>41</sup> which is another instance of a connection with American postmodernist writing. Indeed the Memorandum itself resembles a cut-up as Burroughs pioneered, an amalgamation of different parts that remain quite separate to one another but sewn together by their common theme, the reading flow interrupted by footnotes and one-sentence paragraphs, before the main body finally breaks down to an almost poetic layout, before coming to a close without a full stop (61).

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<sup>41</sup> Burroughs is directly mentioned in two New Italian Epic texts: in *Italia De Profundis*, as I examine in chapter three, and in the bibliography of Jones' *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, which she introduces by saying these works were inserted into her narrative 'con metodo burroughsiano' (2007: 255). Scurati's approach in *Una storia romantica* recalls Burroughs' cut-up technique, as he brings disparate elements together from different media and genres into his collage novel, as we will see in chapter four. I also draw parallels with Burroughs when discussing De Michele's *La visione del cieco* in the following chapter.

This could alternatively be seen as part of another novelty that Wu Ming 1 claims for these texts in the Memorandum, when he says that their narrative voice is characterised by ‘sovversione “nascosta” di linguaggio e stile’ (37). This is listed as one of the seven main features of the New Italian Epic. The subversion is described as hidden because a superficial reading may not bring to the surface their experimentalism, as we will see in the next chapter in the case of De Michele’s *La visione del cieco*. However, some of the texts of the nebula do not seem to be particularly stylistically experimental, either on the surface or underneath. The most striking and common element that we can detect in the style of the texts of the nebula is their orality. An article by Fulginiti (2009) helpfully conceives of orality in the New Italian Epic in a more articulated way than simply rendering speech mimetically, although we do see this in the New Italian Epic too. For Fulginiti, orality can include chorality, the fragmentation of viewpoints and the rhythm of the narrative, as well reflecting how people communicate today in Italy (2009: 2). Many of the techniques she identifies in these texts draw attention to language and how it is mediated; it tends to be portrayed as something that can be recycled or translated or manipulated in different ways.<sup>42</sup> This can be viewed as another example of a postmodernist tendency to question sources of knowledge. It could also be linked to a need to combat misinformation from the mass media, particularly in Berlusconi’s Italy, which underlies many of these writers’ texts, particularly those that are journalistic, as we will see in chapter five.

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<sup>42</sup> For example, Fulginiti (2009) draws attention to the stylisation of New Italian Epic texts like *Manituana - Gomorra* would serve as another instance of this - or the ways in which these writers sometimes experiment with the ambiguities of language, so that we are not sure of what is being referred to or who is speaking. The section on ‘Traduttori traditori sulla linea del testo’ (2009: 6-8) is particularly relevant, as considerations about communication and translation frequently resurface in these texts – again, I could add an example, that is Muratori’s work – which reinforce this awareness of, and self-consciousness with, language. Fulginiti concludes by discussing Jean-Pierre Sarrazac’s concept of rhapsodisation in relation to the New Italian Epic: ‘Il *rapsodo* [...] porta in sé le voci altrui: la sua parola, istanza di un dialogo mediatizzato, si trasforma per accogliere le voci dell’altro. [...] *rapsodizzare* vuol dire, quasi sempre, assumere il punto di vista di un sopravvissuto: colui che parla da un luogo incerto, tra la fine e l’inizio, dopo la catastrofe, e restituisce cittadinanza alle voci dei morti’ (Fulginiti 2009: 10). This is an interesting proposition in relation to ideas about witnessing in the New Italian Epic, which I address in particular in chapter five.

Some of these texts use digital storytelling to communicate and spread their message, which is another way of working against Berlusconi's media control, as Brook and Patti have pointed out (2014: Kindle locations 302-306). In the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 sees the use of new technologies in the New Italian Epic as part of what Henry Jenkins has called convergence culture in his book of the same name (2006a).<sup>43</sup> Some texts of the nebula (and the Memorandum itself) are transmedial, as Wu Ming 1 points out (45), employing different platforms in order to examine their subject matter. This is what Jenkins calls 'content streaming', a shift 'from media-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels' (2006a: 243). It can mean that the texts of the nebula are not simply the paper copies of the books, but are supplemented by online material, such as pictures, photographs, secondary reading, film and/or music, either on websites or through social networks. The way in which new technologies are exploited is connected to these writers' aim to give literature a social role. As Jenkins says, looking at the way in which culture has changed in the Information Age shows us 'new ways of thinking about citizenship and collaboration' (2006a: 246). In the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 cites the pertinent comment made by Magini and Santoni (2008) that literature needs to adapt to the constant mutations and complexities of today's reality (71). Many of these writers use technology as a medium for reinvigorating literary tradition and engaging with national issues in a way that is relevant to the world we live in and includes the wider public.

A prime example of a text that exploits different media is Wu Ming's *Manituana* (2007b). Not only did Wu Ming release a trailer on YouTube and create a website with supplementary information about the story and period in which it was set,<sup>44</sup> but in the text itself readers can find a key to access a special website reserved only for those who have read

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<sup>43</sup> Wu Ming have interacted with Jenkins online in an interview on Jenkins' blog (Jenkins 2006b and 2006c) and also wrote the introduction to the Italian translation of *Convergence Culture* (Wu Ming 2007a).

<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.manituana.com/documenti/0/0/it> (accessed 07.08.15).

the novel, called ‘livello 2’, where there is further information on the characters and subject matter, as well as a bibliography, a comments thread, a section entitled ‘diramazioni’ in which people can contribute spin-off stories, and a section that details Wu Ming’s collaborative writing technique. This both deepens the readers’ experience of the narrative and also gives them a participatory role in it, as they must actively seek out this extra information and choose what to interact with. Whilst it is difficult to gauge how many readers actually access this site, there is a lively comments thread and various imaginative ‘diramazioni’, including one that connects *Manituana* to the Balkans conflict,<sup>45</sup> although the pdf file with the story has now disappeared. This is the most detailed extension of a New Italian Epic text; others tend to include extra photos, videos and documents on blogs, Pinterest and/or Tumblr, as in the case of Genna’s *Fine impero*<sup>46</sup> and his *La vita umana sul pianeta terra*,<sup>47</sup> which are also explored alongside his other texts on his detailed blog,<sup>48</sup> or Antar Mohamed and Wu Ming 2’s *Timira*, and Roberto Santachiara and Wu Ming 1’s *Point Lenana* (see chapter four). Wu Ming’s blog, *Giap*, and Genna’s blog in themselves can also be seen as examples of transmedia storytelling, as they extend the messages to be found in their novels as a place where they can post a wide range of materials and links.

Wu Ming 1 sees such extensions as part of what Jenkins refers to as ‘bottom-up participatory culture’, in which consumers now participate actively in the media system (2006a: 243). This often happens in the twenty-first century through blogs, fan communities, social networking and open-source principles (2006a: 3). We can also see this participatory culture in action in the spin-offs of some New Italian Epic texts that go beyond online material too, such as a stage version of Luther Blissett’s *Q* and an album by the folk-rock

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<sup>45</sup> See <http://inside.manituana.com/documenti/90/8329> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>46</sup> See <http://fineimpero.tumblr.com/> and <https://uk.pinterest.com/giugenna/fine-impero/> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>47</sup> See <https://uk.pinterest.com/giugenna/la-vita-umana-sul-pianeta-terra/> and <http://lavitaumana.tumblr.com/> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>48</sup> See <http://www.giugenna.com/> (accessed 07.08.15).

band Yo Yo Mundi based on Wu Ming's 54 (as Wu Ming 2 tells Jenkins 2006c); the life of the texts is not limited to the original paper copies or to the control of their authors. The New Italian Epic has also been associated with various attempts to involve the internet community in writing the original texts themselves, such as Wu Ming's early projects *Ti chiamerò Russell*<sup>49</sup> and *La ballata del Corazza 2.0*,<sup>50</sup> or Magini and Santoni's project *Scrittura industriale collettiva*.<sup>51</sup> Italy in the new millennium has been a particularly fertile ground for new techniques of collective writing and reader participation, ideas which are at the heart of the Memorandum and of Jenkins' participatory culture.

However, in some ways Wu Ming and Jenkins' ideas seem rather utopian,<sup>52</sup> and they are not always present in these texts either. The advent of new technologies supposedly leads to the democratisation of culture, but market forces still play a key role in culture in Italy and beyond, and, viewed cynically, the transmedial elements of many New Italian Epic texts could be seen as effective marketing tools. New Italian Epic writers such as Scurati, Genna, Evangelisti, De Cataldo and particularly Saviano are well-known writers whose voices are very much heard on the Italian cultural scene, and beyond in the case of Saviano, which begs the question: to what extent can we see this phenomenon as truly including a wider public in culture? Many New Italian Epic writers do not use the potential of the internet and digital technologies to involve a wider community when writing their books. Wu Ming 1 also insists on the primacy of the written word in the Memorandum, despite technological developments,

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<sup>49</sup> Wu Ming wrote the first chapter of a sci-fi novel, then anyone could write and send subsequent chapters, which were selected by a jury online. It led to the creation of another Italian writing collective, Kai Zen (<http://www.kaizenlab.it/>).

<sup>50</sup> Wu Ming put a short story online and invited readers to work on it, revising the various versions to publish a final text that can be downloaded. Spin-offs include a graphic novel, a theatrical performance and a musical score (as Wu Ming 2 tells Jenkins 2006c).

<sup>51</sup> See their website for details of how their technique works, the tagline of which is 'Tutti scrivono tutto': <http://www.scritturacollettiva.org/>.

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, there was a special issue of *Cultural Studies* in 2011, entitled 'Rethinking Convergence/Culture', which was dedicated to the need to scrutinise and problematise elements of Jenkins' work (see Hay and Couldry 2011).



stating: ‘L’epicentro rimane letterario, ma il sisma arriva ovunque’ (89). The importance of print culture can be seen by the fact that the Memorandum eventually appeared in a definitive paper copy; for all the revolutionary aspects that Jenkins describes and Wu Ming advocate, there is an insistence on the book itself. It seems as if Wu Ming 1 wants to have it both ways in the Memorandum and, once again, there is a sense of both newness and tradition intertwined here. He may believe in the power of Jenkins’ convergence culture to revolutionise literature, but literature is still centred on the book object.

Perhaps it is beneficial too to look beyond Jenkins when considering the transmedial elements of the New Italian Epic. It would not be out of place to liken such digital storytelling to Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia in the novel, which incorporates extraliterary elements as part of its ‘living contact with the unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)’ (Bakhtin 1981: 7). Piga perceptively likens Wu Ming’s transmediality to Eco’s conception of the ‘opera aperta’, seen through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the book as a rhizome, as well as placed within twenty-first century participatory convergence culture (2014: Kindle locations 1140-1144). As we shall see in chapter four, parallels with Eco’s work tend to be downplayed in the New Italian Epic, but the experimentalism of Eco can be seen as another important precedent for these writers. As Brook and Patti point out, new technologies have made it possible to realise ideas that could only be theorised by people like Eco, or Calvino in his conception of the ‘iper-romanzo’ (Brook and Patti 2014: Kindle locations 43-56).<sup>53</sup>

Wu Ming 1’s aims are also not dissimilar to that of Tondelli’s Under 25 project in 1985, an attempt to open up literature to young people and insert their voices into literature.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> This idea appears in Calvino’s story ‘Il conte di Montecristo’ in the collection *Ti con Zero* (1967).

<sup>54</sup> I also discuss Tondelli in chapter three as a literary influence, although once again unacknowledged, for Genna in *Italia De Profundis*.

In common with the Under 25 Project, narrating is a political act for the New Italian Epic, and a way of getting different voices heard than those of the establishment. When presenting the project in the magazine *Linus*, Tondelli asked young writers to submit contributions in which they wrote about their reality instead of letting others speak for them:

Perché invece non raccontate quello che fate, che sentite: i vostri tormenti, i vostri rapporti a scuola, con le ragazze, con la famiglia [...] Perché non scrivete pagine contro chi odiate? O per chi amate? C'è bisogno di sapere tutte queste cose. Siete gli unici a poterlo fare. Nessun giornalista, per quanto abile, potrà raccontarle al vostro posto. Nessuno scrittore. Sarà sempre qualcosa di diverso. Siete voi che dovete prendere la parola e dire quello che non vi va o che vi sta bene. Siete voi che dovete raccontare (1998: 323).

The result of this call to the pen was a collection of short stories, *Giovani blues*, which found a new language that was less literary and more oral than other literature of the time (Tondelli 1998: 352), fragments that reflected the modern world's lack of unity and coherence (Tondelli 1998: 364). Wu Ming 1 does not call for stories in the Memorandum, but instead describes a similar search for new tools to speak of what is happening, a mode of expression adapted to what it is like to be alive now. The way in which this manifests itself is altered by the changing cultural landscape in the twenty-first century, but harks back once again to predecessors.

Once more, the New Italian Epic texts draw on tradition but simultaneously reflect the contemporary world. The New Italian Epic shows how literature can be influenced by, but also exploit and problematise elements of, twenty-first century culture, combining them with more conventional forms of literature, just as these writers have both tried to go beyond

previous literary experiences but have also - whether they ignore it or not - drawn on them to create these unidentified narrative objects.

## **Italian**

It is difficult to separate the arguments for newness from those for Italian-ness in the Memorandum. As I have already demonstrated, the debates on the genealogy of the phenomenon have taken on an Italian hue, particularly concerning postmodernism, and, analogously, the contextual elements that I will discuss in this section are also related to the spirit of the times, new conditions that have filtered down to the New Italian Epic texts. Nevertheless, I include context in the 'Italian' section of this chapter due to the peculiarly Italian light that Wu Ming 1 casts it in; he states of the changes that have taken place in recent years: 'In nessun altro contesto si sarebbe verificato lo stesso incontro di reagenti, la stessa confluenza di energie. Gli stimoli avrebbero avuto risposte diverse' (18). However, I seek to demonstrate here that there are both national and transnational elements to be taken into consideration when examining this phenomenon.

Before looking at the historical context, it is worth highlighting that the choice of the label Italian is striking both in an increasingly globalised world, with notable influences in the New Italian Epic, although frequently overlooked, from migrant writers coming to Italy from other countries, inevitably bringing a transnational dimension to the phenomenon, but also due to Italy itself being a de-centred and plural concept, with many writers operating on a regional rather than nation-wide level, as we shall see. Many of the characteristics of the phenomenon are present in works originating in other national literatures, which Wu Ming 1

himself does not shy away from mentioning in the Memorandum (17),<sup>55</sup> and, throughout this thesis, I will attempt to draw parallels with recent literature in other (mainly European) countries, of which there are numerous examples. Rushing sees multilingualism as an unspoken characteristic of the New Italian Epic ‘as the Chinese name of the Wu Ming collective and the English title of their manifesto might suggest; this multilingualism appears unconsciously, as a natural cosmopolitanism of the internet age that requires no comment’ (2011). This is alongside the fact that many of the New Italian Epic writers look out beyond the Alps, whether it is through translation of their works into other languages – as seen in the case of Wu Ming themselves, or in that of Evangelisti – adaptation into other media that is then exported worldwide – Saviano’s *Gomorra*, for instance, which has been made into a film and television series – or positioning their own work in terms of other national literary experiences – for example, Genna draws on a wide range of international intertextual references in *Italia De Profundis*, as we shall see in chapter three.

Approaches to recent literature vary from region to region, as Mondello has written about in terms of the different schools of *noir* on the peninsula.<sup>56</sup> We can locate several key centres for the New Italian Epic in Italy: Bologna, Milan and Rome, despite some writers being sprinkled elsewhere in the peninsula.<sup>57</sup> There are also writers who are very much transnational, including Janeczek, who is from a Polish family, grew up in Germany and lives in northern Italy, or Ghermandi, born in Ethiopia of an Italian father and Ethiopian mother, and living in Bologna.

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<sup>55</sup> After referring to Italian literary tradition and its effects on the New Italian Epic, he states: ‘Tuttavia, in un mondo di flussi, mercati e comunicazioni transnazionali è non soltanto possibile, ma addirittura inevitabile essere eredi di più tradizioni e avere influenze oltre a quelle nazionali’ (17). He mentions the American writer James Ellroy, but particularly points to Latin American writers, such as Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Daniel Chavarría, Rolo Diez and Miguel Bonasso (17), a list to which we could also add Roberto Bolaño.

<sup>56</sup> Mondello outlines the different regional groups: the *Gruppo 13* from Bologna, the *Scuola dei Duri* in Milan, and the *Neonoir* group in Rome (2010a: 18).

<sup>57</sup> Saviano’s *Gomorra* is firmly based in Naples, Carlotto’s *gialli* centre around a private detective known as the Alligator who lives and works in Padua, and Camilleri is grounded in the Sicilian context.

Bologna is the centre of the New Italian Epic phenomenon. This is not only due to it being the city where writers such as Brizzi, Lucarelli, Evangelisti and Wu Ming themselves live, work and sometimes situate their texts, as seen in Wu Ming's depiction of the red city in the post-war years in *54*, or between different times frames in *Asce di guerra*, written jointly with Vitaliano Ravagli. The importance of Bologna can also be attributed to its lively cultural and political scene, which undoubtedly conditioned the development of the New Italian Epic. The city was the backdrop for intellectual opposition to the establishment connected to the *Movimento del '77*, and was the birth place of political initiatives such as the Indiani Metropolitani, the satirical magazine *Frigidaire*, and Radio Alice, an independent radio station which Wu Ming have in fact written about in their screenplay for Guido Chiesa's 2004 film *Lavorare con lentezza*. Whilst these contemporary writers would have been children at the time, the Memorandum posthumously grew out of this fertile environment in Bologna.

Milan and Rome constitute the other important locations for the New Italian Epic. Genna and Scurati, despite the latter originally hailing from Naples, are based in Milan, as their works analysed in this thesis indicate. Biondillo's detective stories with the protagonist Inspector Ferraro are situated in the Quarto Oggiaro district of Milan,<sup>58</sup> and Philopat's *La banda Bellini* and *I viaggi di mel*, which are name-checked in the Memorandum as prime examples of an epic narrative and of an unidentified narrative object respectively (12 & 14), make up a trilogy, alongside *Costretti a sanguinare*, that is based on a semi-autobiographical account of the author's experiences of the Milanese underground punk movement. Philopat, however, is another writer who moves between regions; his work written collaboratively with

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<sup>58</sup> De Michele sees Quarto Oggiaro in Biondillo's work as an allegory for the whole of Italy: 'Il quartiere milanese nel quale Biondillo ambienta i suoi romanzi è, nello stesso tempo, Quarto Oggiaro e l'Italia intera: è allegoria di un paese che ha perso non solo la capacità di dare senso la distinzione tra bene e male, ma anche la cognizione dell'esistenza di quella differenza. E attraverso questa allegoria Biondillo interroga con lo sguardo dell'architetto il quartiere per interrogarsi eticamente sulla deriva di una nazione' (2009a).

Duka, *Roma k.o*, looks at the Italian capital. Like the other New Italian Epic writers whose work is based in Rome – in particular De Cataldo<sup>59</sup> and Siti<sup>60</sup> – *Roma k.o* is concerned with an alternative vision of the eternal city, with the narrative taking place on the city's peripheries and in the underworld, rather than at the recognisable centre of the Italian state. The Roman writers very much distance their narratives from traditional visions of the capital and instead examine the modern-day reality of the city, its many layers of history and politics co-existing and colliding.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, the New Italian Epic has regional aspects that are overlooked by Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum in an attempt to unite the work of these writers in his national project.

So how does he justify the Italian label? He outlines the events surrounding the end of the Cold War in order to paint a picture of Italian specificity, some elements of which undoubtedly do seep through into these narratives regardless of their writers' regional affiliations. He argues that the comparisons to be drawn concerning the approaches to their subject matter and the forms of these unusual texts are the result of a combination of global and national events that have conditioned their writers, though different in age, and thus made them part of the same 'generazione letteraria' (11). 1993 is the year in which Wu Ming 1 clearly situates the beginnings of the New Italian Epic phenomenon, although 2001 is seen as a significant turning point for these writers. The Memorandum points to the figurative 'terremoto' (79) in Italy that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall as a key moment, as it

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<sup>59</sup> De Cataldo's *Romanzo criminale* and *Nelle mani giuste*, as well as *Suburra* which he wrote with Carlo Bonini, look particularly at the mafia phenomenon and political corruption in Rome.

<sup>60</sup> Siti charts the changes in the contemporary world. His 2008 text *Il contagio* is situated in a Pasolinian Roman *borgata* and mixes fiction and reality to make wider points about society: 'ho usato nomi fittizi, calcato le tinte, inventati episodi per garantire alla trama più appeal. Ma la casa esiste, in un angolo di borgata che potrebbe essere tutte le borgate' (2008: 26).

<sup>61</sup> Igiaba Scego, whilst not appearing in the Memorandum, has come to be associated with the New Italian Epic phenomenon and in particular its approach to history (see Brioni 2013). Her work moves between Somalia and Italy, and her 2014 text featuring photographs by Rino Bianchi, *Roma negata*, explores an alternative vision of the Italian capital by unpeeling its historical layers and highlighting the hidden fascist and colonial past that have marked the city.

ushered in an ongoing crisis as well as a liberation of energies. With the downfall of the USSR came that of the Italian Communist Party and a complete shake-up of the Italian political system, accompanied by the *Mani pulite* investigations into corruption. This ‘smottamento politico’ as Wu Ming 1 calls it (79) resulted in the ‘Earthquake elections’ of 1992, with higher percentage shifts and instability than had been seen since the end of the Second World War (Ginsborg 2001: 255). The political vacuum produced by this crisis was to be filled by Berlusconi, with his control of the mass media, conflicts of interest and corruption.<sup>62</sup> Emmott states: ‘having had a humdinger of a political crisis in the early 1990s, when most of the political establishment went on trial for corruption and the main parties all collapsed, Italy then sleepwalked into a new dark political alley’ (2012: 3). This situation seemed to be exacerbated in 2001, which saw not only the watershed moment of 9/11, but also the violence on the occasion of the G8 Summit in Genoa<sup>63</sup> and the return to power of Berlusconi. According to the Memorandum, these events contributed to the disillusionment at the supposed new world order that was to follow the collapse of the Berlin Wall and galvanised this generation of writers, as they saw the changes the early nineties should have heralded did not become a reality.

Whilst they are not mentioned in the Memorandum, the events of the *anni di piombo* also underscore or are directly addressed in writing associated with the New Italian Epic, despite most of these writers being too young to have experienced them first-hand. As Lucarelli stressed in his book *Misteri d’Italia*, as well as in other texts and television programmes, there are still many unsolved mysteries in recent Italian history. Traumatic events such as the bombings in Piazza Fontana and Bologna train station, as well as the links

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<sup>62</sup> Despite managing to shake off various corruption charges, he was convicted of tax fraud in 2013.

<sup>63</sup> There was a violent clash between police and protestors resulting in the death of Carlo Giuliani. Amato (2009) underlines the significance of the events at the G8 in a realisation of the failures of Italian society, significantly employing an earthquake metaphor: ‘Nel 2001 si è verificato in Italia un vero e proprio sisma politico’. I discuss these events in more detail in the following chapter on periodisation.

between the state and organised crime, remain without clear answers. Glynn, Lombardi and O’Leary (2012) point out the persistence of the return to these years, particularly in recent Italian films, and, in the same volume, Cecchini states: ‘The *anni di piombo* still represent an open wound in Italian collective memory. Unlike other countries that have emerged from bloody internal conflicts and outbreaks of war among the various groups that constitute the nation, Italy has proved to be unable to establish a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation aimed at reaching a shared consensus on re-imagining the past’ (2012: 195). Many New Italian Epic texts suggest that this generation seems to be haunted by the events of their parents’ generation and the cover-ups that have still not been fully addressed by the establishment. Sarasso’s *Trilogia sporca dell’Italia*,<sup>64</sup> De Cataldo’s *Romanzo criminale*, Genna’s *Nel nome di Ishmael* and his *Dies irae* re-examine many of the key events of those years, combining conspiracy theories, facts and fictionalising in an attempt to process the so-called years of lead.

Wu Ming 2 significantly refers to Pasolini’s famous denunciation of the ‘strage di stato’ in reference to the unsolved mysteries of Italy (193), showing him to be an important predecessor for the New Italian Epic as an *engagé* intellectual.<sup>65</sup> Indeed Olivero has pointed out that the New Italian Epic is ‘Figlio diretto dell’*Io so* e di *Petrolio* di Pier Paolo Pasolini’, significantly employing another metaphor of paternity.<sup>66</sup> Pasolini famously declared that he knew truths about Italy’s recent scandals despite not having proof: ‘Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore’ (1974). Writers are seen as being uniquely able to access the truth by imagining what really happened and literature is the privileged domain for addressing

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<sup>64</sup> Sarasso’s trilogy consists of *Confine di Stato*, *Settanta* and *Il paese che amo*.

<sup>65</sup> Wu Ming 1 has also referred to Pasolini’s *Petrolio* as an example of an unidentified narrative object (2009e: 19-20), and it is an important reference point for Genna in *Italia De Profundis*, as I explore in chapter three.

<sup>66</sup> *Petrolio* has been seen as important precursor for these recent texts by other critics such as Patti (2010), who has labelled it an unidentified narrative object. A quote from *Petrolio* appears at the beginning of the second section of the Memorandum (63) and also at the beginning of Genna’s *Italia De Profundis*.



current social and political issues. This trope has been re-employed by writers of the nebula – Genna, Saviano and Jones all experiment with the ‘Io so’ (see chapter five) – which is indicative of the way in which the New Italian Epic attempts to access a new truth through literature that may not be completely reliable or straightforward but makes its readers sit up and listen. Wu Ming 2 explains the aim of such writing in his essay included in the print version of the Memorandum: ‘Se per indagare i fatti usiamo la narrativa, e non la storia o le scienze umane, è perché vogliamo permetterci di essere visionari, di dimostrare per assurdo e per metafora, di concatenare gli eventi con simboli e analogie, di immaginare, quando ci mancano, *quel che succederebbe se avessimo le prove*’ (190, emphasis added).<sup>67</sup>

The way in which these writers translate reality into literature has led to many texts associated with the New Italian Epic being labelled by some as ‘neo-neorealismo’ (De Cataldo 2008), by others part of ‘un ritorno alla realtà’ (Donnarumma 2008b), ‘un realismo allegorico’ (Casadei 2011),<sup>68</sup> ‘nuovo realismo’ (Ferraris 2011), or in Magini and Santoni’s terms ‘realismo liquido’ (2008). The latter is perhaps the most fitting of these labels, as the real-life basis of such writing is often questionable – I discuss the unusual configurations of fiction and nonfiction in chapters four and five – but also because, as Ceserani rightly argues (2012: 212), Bauman’s (2000) description of the current cultural climate as one of liquid modernity versus a previous solid modernity is perhaps the most fitting description of this

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<sup>67</sup> Pasolini’s presence can be felt throughout the nebula in various ways: there is a character called Pasolini in Lucarelli’s *L’ottava vibrazione* (2008); Genna quotes *Petrolio* at the beginning of *Italia De Profundis* (see chapter three) and refers to Pasolini again in *Fine impero* (2013: 158); Pasolini’s death is mentioned in De Michele’s *Tre uomini pardossali* and in his *La visione del cieco* (see chapter two); Scurati quotes Pasolini at the end of *Una storia romantica*, calling himself ‘una forza del passato’ (2007: 547); Siti references Pasolini in his depiction of the seedy underside of Rome and modern consumerism in *Il contagio* (2008: 309).

<sup>68</sup> Casadei (2011) sees the New Italian Epic texts as belonging to a broader type of realism that represents reality but introduces incongruous or unrealistic elements into the representation, which can lead to allegorical interpretations. It is worth pointing out that Casadei explicitly pits his ‘realismo allegorico’ against what he sees as Wu Ming 1’s more simplistic description of the workings of allegory in the New Italian Epic, expressed by the idea of an ‘algoritmo’ in the Memorandum, which Casadei feels implies a single possible allegorical interpretation (2011: 12). Certainly, the ‘algoritmo’ appears to be a little reductive, and yet we will see that Wu Ming 1’s allusions to the combination of realism and epic indicate a more complex approach to reality.

cultural shift, as well as being an effective way of circumventing controversies surrounding the term postmodernism. The interaction between fact and fiction, truth and possibility that we will see in the New Italian Epic texts is both part of a more general shift, but also a specifically Italian tradition that draws on figures such as Pasolini, among others.

In terms of this interaction between fact and fiction in the historical novels of the nebula, which I analyse in detail in chapter four, they re-examine history not from a hegemonic perspective but rather seek to undermine accepted historiography, or at least call it into question. This is partly achieved by the choice of many New Italian Epic writers to focus on protagonists ‘dalla parte sbagliata della Storia’, as Wu Ming put it in the blurb of *Manituana* (2007b). Such an approach is typified by the opening line of Luther Blissett’s *Q*, which identifies its protagonist as literally and metaphorically not being in the foreground of history: ‘Sulla prima pagina è scritto: Nell'affresco sono una delle figure di sfondo’ (1999: 3). This is part of what Wu Ming<sup>1</sup> describes in the Memorandum as the ‘sguardo obliquo’ (26) that is key to the New Italian Epic perspective, seeing events from a different, unexpected angle. The historical novels often achieve this by jumping forwards and backwards in time, or by narrating from multiple perspectives, both through having a large cast of characters, but also through including real or fabricated historical documentation within the narrative, which may provide different accounts of the events portrayed, as we will see in *Timira*. In chapter four, I will argue that the approach to history and fiction of the New Italian Epic writers can be compared to that of Manzoni, as well as to microhistorians such as Ginzburg who later re-activated Manzoni’s work. Whilst the techniques of these novels are not absent from other national literatures, we can certainly see certain aspects as demonstrating an Italian specificity. Readers are encouraged to re-evaluate history, yet their interpretations are often open to multiple possibilities and the answers are not spelled out in these historical novels, in an Italian tradition that can be traced back to the nineteenth century.

However, for all Wu Ming's talk of looking at the past and present from unexpected, subaltern perspectives, both the writers of this literary generation and their texts are dominated by educated,<sup>69</sup> white men. In the section of the Memorandum entitled 'La nebulosa' (10-14), in which Wu Ming 1 lists New Italian Epic writers, only four out of twenty-four names are women writers, approximately 17%, and only one out of the twenty-four is not ethnically Italian (Janeczek). In the footnote that he added to include texts he had originally omitted due to not having read them at the time the Memorandum first appeared (13n5), the percentage of women to men is even worse: only one out of sixteen names (6.25%) is a woman, that is Ghermandi, who is also the only one with an ethnicity that is not completely Italian.<sup>70</sup> This under-representation then spills down into the novels themselves, in which the main protagonists are almost always men, with sometimes disturbingly few female characters with any agency. Mecchia makes a perceptive assessment of the female characters in Wu Ming's work:

Women, in their novels, are witches, lovers, healers, mothers, sisters, daughters: intelligent, sensitive, beautiful and beloved [...] They are rarely given direct political agency, and since they can't plausibly take part in the physical battles that tend to represent the central part of the plot development in all of the 'narrative objects', they are confined to the domestic sphere of eroticism, motherhood and logistical support, while the heroic warriors – from the Bolognese periphery to Laos, from Venice to Istanbul – keep fighting on (2009: 207-8).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Not only did the New Italian Epic develop in and around the University of Bologna, but some of its writers, such as Siti and Scurati, are academics as well as writers.

<sup>70</sup> It is worth pointing out that, when Wu Ming 1 talks about the Italian literary tradition, he does acknowledge some female writers: he mentions Anna Banti in the main body of the Memorandum (16), and in 'Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori' he discusses Goliarda Sapienza (125). However, Elsa Morante's *La Storia* is a glaring omission here. The migrant writing that preceded the New Italian Epic and was undoubtedly an influence is also not acknowledged, as I explore in chapter two.

<sup>71</sup> Wu Ming have acknowledged their shortcomings in this area: 'It is difficult for male writers to depict convincing female characters, that was the problem with *Q*, the way we described women was... lame. We're very self-critical

Other New Italian Epic texts contain similarly worrying, gendered stereotypes, whether it is the prostitute with a heart of gold, Patrizia, in De Cataldo's *Romanzo criminale* and *Nelle mani giuste*, or the beautiful but ingenuous Lara, a high class escort, in De Michele's trilogy, as well as the fact that, as I point out in chapter three, it is generally fathers and sons rather than mothers and daughters who are the focus of interest in the nebula. As Mecchia rightly states in terms of Wu Ming, such limited female characterisation 'would not be a source of concern in itself, if it didn't raise suspicions of cultural conformity in an enterprise that thinks of itself as subversive' (2009: 208). She argues that this calls into question Wu Ming's opposition to *berlusconismo*, in that it does nothing to question the problematic female stereotypes that circulated in the public sphere under Berlusconi (2009: 209-210), and this could be extended to certain other writers of the nebula.

Alternative models, different voices and oblique viewpoints bring to mind not only postcolonial and feminist thinkers from beyond Italy's borders such as Gayatri Spivak, but also point towards home-grown theorists such as Adriana Cavarero. However, whether made in Italy or abroad, concepts like these are absent from the Memorandum. By employing feminist and post-colonial readings, Burns (2001) brought to light alternative types of *impegno* in the work of women and migrant writers at the end of the twentieth century, but such experiences seem to be overlooked in the New Italian Epic's version of politically and ethically committed writing. Aside from the Italian label being more articulated than it would

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about that' (Celluloid Liberation Front 2013). However, I am not convinced that their subsequent work has remedied this. *L'Armata dei Sonnambuli* has Marie, 'una cattiva madre' (Wu Ming 2014b: 694) who abandons her son for political struggle, and who seems to be the victim of gender essentialism, feeling her politics through her body rather than her mind, as she says in one political meeting: 'Io mi fido del mio stomaco e dei miei occhi [...] Il mio stomaco mi dice che quel che riesco a comprare al mercato non basta per me e per mio figlio, i miei occhi vedono che i ricchi hanno da mangiare' (Wu Ming 2014b: 267). Perhaps, as Mecchia argues, this is partly a problem of genre: 'historical novel, epic tradition, adventure novel, mystery and spy stories, comic book popular culture and in the case of the *Manituana* website, interactive video gaming [...] what Wu Ming has not been able or willing to recognize, so far, is the gender exclusivity often implicit in such modes of expression [...] It is impossible, when reading the narrative objects produced by Wu Ming, not to raise the issue of the relationship between genre and gender. All of their cultural references have a strong "male" connotation' (2009: 207).

seem at first sight, including regional and transnational elements, we can also see it as signifying predominantly texts written by white Italian males, an indication of the way in which the phenomenon tends to exclude writing that could truly work towards questioning dominant narratives.

## Epic

The ‘epic’ label could be seen as another instance of this problematic slant; the epic remains tied up with heroic male adventures, in which women cannot participate or are left at home, as described by Mecchia above. Traditionally, the epic pitted western imperial ideology against what Quint has described as ‘Epic's losers, the enemies of empire whom epic ideology assimilates with the East, woman, nature, irrationality, chaos’ (1989: 27). The choice of the word was also a cause for controversy surrounding the Memorandum, as it was seen by some critics to be an inappropriate description of what these texts were.<sup>72</sup> Certainly the term epic needs unpacking to avoid confusion about how it is being used here. The texts of the nebula do not openly engage with classical tradition, despite some references to epic figures or stories,<sup>73</sup> nor do they contain most of the pre-requisites of the epic genre. Where are the gods in the New Italian Epic, or the heroes? Wu Ming 1 himself says in the

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Di Stefano 2008, or Ferroni, who made the damning indictment: ‘Col proposito di chiamare a raccolta una vasta generazione di narratori, qualcuno ha coniato un’apposita etichetta, piuttosto balzana in verità, quella di *New Italian Epic*; distorcendo completamente ogni possibile accezione di “epica”, con un proposito di valorizzazione e monumentalizzazione di testi che sono perfettamente agli antipodi di ogni epica possibile, giocati su di una scrittura neutra e priva di respiro o su artifici esteriori e ripetitivi’ (2010: 39-40).

<sup>73</sup> Wu Ming’s *Altai* (2009c), for example, apart from centring around a dramatic odyssey and the clash of East and West, contains references to Heracles (20), Ulysees (183), and the battles of Thermopylae (158) and Salamis (170). In Wu Ming’s *54*, when Pierre goes to find his father, we are told: ‘Telemaco andava incontro a Ulisse’ (2002: 252); this is also interesting in terms of the discussion of Recalcati’s Telemachus Complex in chapter three. Laura Pugno’s *Sirene* deals with myth in imagining a dystopian future populated by mermaids. Wu Ming 4’s *Stella del mattino* depicts J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert Graves, whose work explored myths and epics, and near the beginning there is a lecture from Professor Murray who discusses Aristotle’s *Poetics* and how to translate into English the concept of mythopoesis (2008: 22-4), a theme which is key to the New Italian Epic.

Memorandum that if there is a hero in the texts of the nebula, he or she influences the action ‘in modo sghembo’ (31). In the case of Jones’ *Sappiano le mie parole*, she actually tells an interlocutor at one point that her approach is specifically in contrast to epic: ‘Non sono venuta qui per fare della poesia né dell’epica. Sono venuta qui per capire e osservare’ (2007: 62).

However, recent re-writings of epic from new perspectives, such as Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990), a poem that reflects on history and collective memory in the Caribbean, or Margaret Atwood’s feminist rewriting of the *Odyssey* through Penelope’s voice in *The Penelopiad* (2005), have shown that we do not necessarily need to think of the epic within the rigid confines of tradition. It is worth remembering that the novel has been alternately described as the ‘modern bourgeois epic’ by Hegel,<sup>74</sup> or ‘the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God’ by Lukács (1978: 88), which implies epic and novel may not be as separate as theorists such as Bakhtin have argued. When discussing *Omeros*, Farrell points out that Quint and others have recently presented ‘views of the epic that are profoundly at odds with received opinion concerning the closed, monologic nature of the genre’ (1999: 284). Dimock similarly sees *Omeros* as showing ‘just how *unmoribund* the epic is’, and proposes updating the Bakhtinian vision of the epic as behind us: ‘I would like to see it as an archaic genre that has made a loop into the present: still evolving, still energized by foreign tongues, and reproducing itself across many scales, bearing witness to the input of many environments’ (2006: 96).

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<sup>74</sup> Hegel: ‘it is quite different with the novel, the modern bourgeois epic. Here we have completely before us again the wealth and many-sidedness of interests, situations, characters, relations involved in life, the background of a whole world, as well as the epic portrayal of events. But what is missing is the *primitive* poetic general situation out of which the epic proper proceeds. A novel in the modern sense of the word presupposes a world already prosaically ordered’ (1975: 1092, translation modified). I have changed Knox’s translation of ‘romance’ to ‘novel’ and ‘popular’ to ‘bourgeois’, in line with others who refer to Hegel’s conception of the novel as a ‘modern bourgeois epic’, such as Rancière (2004: 71).

Wu Ming 1 explains his choice to call these texts epic in the Memorandum:

Queste narrazioni sono epiche perché riguardano imprese storiche o mitiche, eroiche o comunque avventurose: guerre, anabasi, viaggi iniziatici, lotte per la sopravvivenza, sempre all'interno di conflitti più vasti che decidono le sorti di classi, popoli, nazioni o addirittura dell'intera umanità, sugli sfondi di crisi storiche, catastrofi, formazioni sociali al collasso. Spesso il racconto fonde elementi storici e leggendari, quando non sconfina nel soprannaturale.

[...] [Sono] [l]ibri che fanno i conti con la turbolenta storia d'Italia, o con l'ambivalente rapporto tra Europa e America, e a volte si spingono anche più in là.

Inoltre, queste narrazioni sono epiche perché grandi, ambiziose, 'a lunga gittata', 'di ampio respiro' e tutte le espressioni che vengono in mente. Sono epiche le dimensioni dei problemi da risolvere per scrivere questi libri, compito che di solito richiede diversi anni, e ancor più quando l'opera è destinata a trascendere misura e confini della forma-romanzo, come nel caso di narrazioni transmediali, che proseguono in diversi contesti (14-15).

So, there are epic dimensions in terms of themes – the subject matter of these texts has depth and magnitude, often engaging with questions around myth-making or mythopoesis<sup>75</sup> – and also in terms of form – these texts are often long, taking time to read and to write, and the story may not only be limited to the book itself. Indeed, Wu Ming have linked their transmediality to epic qualities outside of the Memorandum too, as they have argued that, as in ancient times, story-telling has become a community activity again, with stories open to revision and different versions just as Greek myths were (Wu Ming 1 and Wu Ming 2 2007).

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<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of mythopoesis in the work of Wu Ming, see Piga 2010.

As Wu Ming 1 states, the texts of the nebula can be seen as epic in that some of them depict historical watershed moments, what Bakhtin describes in epic as ‘a world of “beginnings” and “peak times” in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families’ (1981: 13). These are often moments associated with Italy’s nationhood, as shown by the historical novels that re-visit the Risorgimento or the Italian empire, discussed in chapter four, seeming to reinforce the ‘Italian’ label, although some look beyond the peninsula. They focus on moments that led to a change in society and the course of history, with one way of life or power structure being pitted against another in their narratives. We can group the New Italian Epic texts around particular threshold moments like this, such as the beginning of the Modern period, as depicted in Luther Blissett’s *Q*, Wu Ming’s *Altai* or Carlotto’s *Cristiani di Allah*, with the latter two depicting the classic epic confrontation of East versus West in terms of the Ottoman Empire versus Europe. We can also see in the nebula more recent ‘clashes of empires’, such as the Second World War, a frequent choice of subject matter for many New Italian Epic writers – as seen, for example, in Genna’s *Hitler*, Bajani’s *Ogni promessa*, or Arpaia’s *L’angelo della storia* - or colonialism, as seen in the historical novels that examine Italian colonialism, or Wu Ming’s *Manituana*, which looks at the twilight years of the Iroquois Six Nations on the eve of the American Civil War.

Yet, their approach differs from traditional epics in various ways. These texts tend to be on the side of history’s losers, as mentioned earlier. Petrella said of Luther Blissett’s *Q* that it was an ‘epica degli *ex-centris*, ovvero degli emarginati, dei reietti e degli sconfitti’ (2006: 146). Moreover, Quint states: ‘telling a full story, epic claims to possess *the* full story’ (1989: 14). The New Italian Epic, however, has no epic linearity moving towards a goal or sense of completion, no single-minded view of history that hinges on the rightness of western ideology. Wu Ming 1 explains in the Memorandum that the New Italian Epic tends towards alternative history fiction, or ‘ucronia’ (34), but this is not always employed in its strict sense.



Several texts do imagine different outcomes to historical events, acting as a means of considering alternative possibilities in the past and their possible consequences, such as Brizzi's trilogy beginning with *L'inattesa piega degli eventi*, in which Mussolini is not overthrown but continues to govern Italy after the Second World War. As the title of the first volume suggests, Brizzi gives a sense that events are subject to chance and to the choices we make. However, others engage in alternative history fiction by containing an implicit or potential *ucronia*, a sense that events could have gone in different ways even if they did not. Wu Ming 1 explains that these texts reflect on other possibilities at these historical watershed moments, 'in cui molti sviluppi erano possibili e la storia *avrebbe potuto* imboccare altre vie. Il *what if* è potenziale, non attuale' (35). This means that the past is not portrayed as immutable, but as having possibilities, just as the present contains the potential for change or new paths to follow. As we shall see in chapter four in an analysis of the approaches to history in the New Italian Epic, these writers ask questions about how our understanding of history was reached and what implications it has for us now, questions that were not traditionally at the centre of epic narratives.

However, although these novels highlight the fact that we cannot have the full story about the past, they do reach for a type of fullness that is based not on exhaustiveness but on multiplying perspectives. By filling their stories with documents, characters, micro(hi)stories, multiperspectival narration<sup>76</sup> and transmedial elements, they indicate possible ways of filling the gaps in our knowledge, considering different versions of their subject matter. Whilst they question the supposed full story of national historiography, or indeed of any historical knowledge, they also suggest a form of 'new' or even postmodern fullness, that of being aware of the various possibilities, perspectives or, in Brizzi's terms, *pieghe* in any given

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<sup>76</sup> This is most clearly employed, for example, by Muratori in *La vita in comune* and by Janeczek in *Le rondini di Montecassino*.

narrative. This is in contrast to the approach of certain Italian writers in the eighties and nineties, who tended to explore more singular perspectives of events. Pertile describes such writers in his introduction to *The New Italian Novel*, noting their emphasis on a private, limited gaze: ‘psychological themes, introspection, autobiography, personal memories and obsessions, a contraction of all horizons to the sphere of an individual and usually private self, caught in the web of insignificant and everyday events. “Minimalism” is a term that keeps recurring in connection with several of our authors’ (1993: 17). The New Italian Epic can be seen as an attempt to move away from this minimalism into the magnitude that Wu Ming 1 describes in the Memorandum.

This could also be seen as being reinforced by the existence of the New Italian Epic as a phenomenon. Pertile said of the situation in the early nineties in Italy: ‘now more than ever the responsibility lies with the individual writer. With the demise of the *neo-avanguardia* and the collapse of ideologies, literary schools and movements no longer exist, nor are there political parties with which the writer can identify. The writer is alone’ (1993: 10). Whilst, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the New Italian Epic is not a literary school, or even a movement, its nebula brings together the work of individual writers. Aside from writing as collectives like Wu Ming, Kai Zen and Scrittura industriale collettiva, many of the writers I analyse in this study have actively engaged with the ideas that Wu Ming 1 put forward about the New Italian Epic in the Memorandum and elsewhere. Such a dialogue about contemporary literature, even with its controversies or ‘face-offs’ (Wu Ming 1 2009e), connects ideas and texts, developing a fuller approach in contrast to the individualism that Pertile associates with the writers he describes. The links that we will see throughout this study with other national literary traditions also give a sense that these writers are not alone in their concerns.

In the special issue of the *Journal of Romance Studies* on the New Italian Epic, Biasini argues that we should take epic to mean an epic *mode* rather than the epic *genre* with all its prescribed norms.<sup>77</sup> Taking Wu Ming's *54* as her primary text, she outlines the following five features of an epic mode that link it to ancient, traditional epic poems: it has a collective, anonymous author; it examines the founding moment of a community; it contains the epic *topos* of the journey; it has microstories divided into separate chapters; and, finally, it borrows characters intertextually - in the case of *54*, the character Ettore came from Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny* (Biasini 2010: 72-3). Certainly, different combinations, though generally not all, of these features can be found in many New Italian Epic texts, although it is Wu Ming's work that best displays all of these five. However, they could also be found in a large number of historical novels from beyond the nebula. Texts that portray characters embarking on journeys, engage with how we understand the past, have a choral element or a large cast of characters: these elements are equally present in Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Indeed, Hainsworth identified in the latter an epic *quality* (1991: 150), which I find a more suitable term for the New Italian Epic, as it allows for even more flexibility to move away from the epic as a genre. Such flexibility is necessary in the light of certain texts in the nebula, such as Siti's *Il contagio* or Bajani's *Se consideri le colpe*, which only have one of Biasini's five elements each – microstories in Siti and a journey in Bajani – and which, arguably, do not provoke immediate or strong associations with the word epic.

Boscolo argues that the criticisms that the Memorandum received about the employment of the word epic were related to the fact that there was an unwillingness to

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<sup>77</sup> 'Most important, then, is the distinction between "epic" as a genre and "epic" as a mode; the former indicates a precise, highly codified and historical literary genre; the latter, formally theorised by Northrop Frye (1957), refers to a wider category, a recognisable characteristic found even in modern novels and in other literary and artistic works. It is a mood created through the explicit trace of the epic genre by means of stylistic or linguistic signs of the literary imaginary of the genre' (Biasini 2010: 71).

accept that Italy was in need of a type of narrative that Bakhtin defined as relating to the representation of a society: ‘the return to an epic narrative mode is tantamount to admitting that Italian society urgently needs to recover the capacity for self-representation, to provide an accurate reflection of itself, in the wake of its dark history and recent political scandals’ (2010b: 20). Wu Ming 1 seemed to be making a similar point when he argued that the last fifteen years of Italian history can be seen as mythical, requiring literature to adopt epic qualities in order to be able to describe it: ‘Ogni giorno hanno luogo catastrofi, mutamenti discontinui che assimiliamo pian piano e non vediamo dalla “giusta distanza”, quella che permetta di capirne la magnitudo’ (2010b: 3). According to Wu Ming 1 and Boscolo, an epic approach seems to be the only way that these texts can encompass what has been happening in Italy and find a way of confronting the magnitude of recent history. This is in stark contrast to the theories on contemporary Italian writing put forward by Giglioli (2011) or Scurati (2006), who, as I discuss in more detail in chapter five, have argued that the opposite is true, that this generation of writers have no great historical events that they have experienced directly to write about.

The truth, naturally, lies somewhere in between: recent history has not been more turbulent than it ever has, but neither is there a lack of important and/or traumatic events to experience and portray. Moreover, whilst there have been cataclysmic historical events – both globally and nationally – the turbulence comes not from the direct experience of them, but from the trauma of the ‘open wound’ created by an absence of resolution that brings back earlier national crises. This can be seen most clearly in the events at the G8 in Genoa in 2001, addressed in the following chapter, which was a very recent moment of crisis for Italy, but its impact was felt more through the re-opening of old wounds related to previous traumatic events, with Carlo Giuliani’s death in 2001 recalling that of Francesco Lorusso in Bologna in 1977, as we shall see. It can even be seen as part of a longer-standing *topos* of the failed

revolution, which has run through Italian national history from the Risorgimento through the Resistance through the crisis of the early nineties to today, which I address in detail in chapter four when discussing Scurati's *Una storia romantica*.

The arguments for these texts having an epic approach to their subject matter as opposed to a novelistic one often seem to stem from a desire to re-invigorate the novel genre, which has been seen by some, particularly in Italy, as being exhausted, indulging in the aimless intellectual play of postmodernism rather than engaging with community and national issues. Biasini (2010: 72), Boscolo (2008) and Vito (2009) all quote the following words of Petrella, who said of contemporary epics like *Q*:

È con questa nuova forma narrativa che il romanzo riesce a riacquistare il vigore delle grandi narrazioni. È con l'epica della 'moltitudine' che probabilmente la letteratura dovrà fare i conti per uscire definitivamente fuori dall'*impasse* della postmodernità (2006: 148).

Once again, we come up against assertions that postmodernism has been exhausted, and there is a need for new forms, but this new form is found in something old, ancient even. Moreover, the epic of the multitude harks back again to a desire for fullness that we can detect in the New Italian Epic.

Later in the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 states that he does not think the epic elements preclude a sense of realism in these texts: 'Realismo ed epica non si escludono a vicenda' (68). According to him, the New Italian Epic is both rooted in contemporary reality but also opens out to epic proportions. He goes on to explain that because realism is associated with denotation, whereas the epic with connotation, an epic approach can transform the nature of this representation of the present situation, once again making it 'fuller' by charging it with

meanings, helping us to see ‘*tutti i significati del racconto*’ (69). It is the epic quality of these texts that makes us truly understand their political and ethical implications. In a subsequent article, Wu Ming 1 explained that these texts have a double gaze, zooming in on individual microstories but also zooming out to see Italy on a macro level; seeing their subject matter ‘*da lontano / da dentro*’ (Wu Ming 1 2010b). He seems to be combining the dichotomies between epic and novel, or approaching the aforementioned Hegelian or Lukácsian vision of the novel as a new rendering of the epic that is appropriate to the present time.

This understanding of epic seems to be closely connected to allegory, although the way in which allegory works in the New Italian Epic is often not as straightforward as Wu Ming 1 portrays it in his discussion. He simplifies the way allegory functions in the nebula into the concept of an ‘*algoritmo*’ (53), saying that we can read the signs in these texts to reach a key to understanding what they are trying to say, or to their underlying ‘*mitologema*’ (97). The concept of ‘*algoritmo*’ is taken from the idea that every videogame has a code or language to be learned in order to progress to higher levels and complete the game. However, if we examine the other references in the Memorandum to allegory and the texts of the nebula themselves, we can detect more complex layers than Wu Ming 1 implies here. It is worth examining his allusion to Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (51), in which the Baroque mourning plays Benjamin analyses reveal ‘a modern allegorical way of looking at things’ (Benjamin 1998: 162) that highlighted a ‘deep-rooted intuition of the problematic character of art’ (Benjamin 1998: 176). Rather than demonstrating a clear link between form and idea, Benjamin saw these allegories as containing tensions and ambiguities; they are uncertain and fragmentary, and, in contrast to the more fixed symbol must ‘constantly unfold in new and surprising ways’ (Benjamin 1998: 183). This ‘new and surprising’ allegorical way of looking at the world is to be found in the *sguardo obliquo* of the New Italian Epic, which Wu Ming 1 explains in the Memorandum in similar terms to Benjamin, in that it aims at

shaking up expectations to understand something new about a familiar past and present: ‘È imperativo depurarsi, cercare di vedere il mondo in altri modi, sorprendendo noi stessi’ (81). Moreover, these other ways of seeing things are open for the reader to interpret and find meaning. As De Michele (2009a) puts it, their allegories circumvent ‘uno schema interpretativo già determinato’. Wu Ming 1 says of Benjamin: ‘basa la propria idea di un’allegoria che continui a “parlare altro”, a essere “riattivata” e rinnovata ogni volta che la si legge, anche col cambiare delle epoche’ (98). We can see a similar dynamic at work in the New Italian Epic, in which an allegorical approach avoids concrete conclusions about its message, moving beyond fixed meanings and ideologies.

Benjamin’s theory of allegory is connected to a monadological approach, which also serves as a fruitful framework for understanding the way in which the New Italian Epic texts operate. Benjamin drew on Leibniz’s theory of monads to conceptualise his analysis of the baroque plays, taking Leibniz’s idea that the world is made up of elementary fragments which act as mirrors of the universe. For Benjamin, monads were not simply particles but also ideas: ‘The idea is a monad – that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world’ (1998: 48). Benjamin’s concept of monads was present in his final unfinished work, the *Passagenwerk* or *Arcades Project*, which could certainly be labelled an unidentified narrative object, a montage consisting of observations, quotations, pictures and statistics in order to create an image of nineteenth century Paris and the changes in society it heralded.<sup>78</sup> Like the New Italian Epic, it focussed on the particular to open out to

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<sup>78</sup>Eiland and McLaughlin describe Benjamin’s conception of *The Arcades Project*: ‘The organised masses of historical objects – the particular items of Benjamin’s display (drafts and excerpts) – together give rise to a “world of secret affinities”, and each separate article in the collection, each entry, was to constitute the “magic encyclopaedia” of the epoch from which it derived. An image of that epoch. In the background of this theory of the historical image, constituent of a historical “mirror world”, stands the idea of the monad’ (1999: x).

general considerations about the past and how we arrived in our present situation. Benjamin states within the text that it was constructed in this way ‘to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event’ (1999: 461). Similarly, we can see the New Italian Epic texts as monads, specific fragments which capture something bigger about society and the world. Together they form a nebula, or what Benjamin would call a constellation of ideas, and give us a better, more complete, but not exhaustive understanding of history by crystallising significant points about Italian society in their focus on individual moments. They approximate what we might call monads with an epic quality. Such texts may be ambiguous in meaning and surprising in approach, but their writers aim to imbue them with a wider, fuller truth.

Overall, it could be argued that the Memorandum is something of an interesting failure, just as Wu Ming 1 describes Jones’ *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, saying: ‘Anche un fallimento insegna, anche un fallimento può essere interessante’ (43). Like Jones’ text, it brings up many interesting issues, but in Wu Ming 1’s text they never get fully developed and appear often in random order, sometimes reappearing later and maybe elaborated on. At times, the abrupt jumps from one subject to another give a sense of arbitrariness and almost irrelevance. For example, in the section entitled ‘Presto o tardi’ (55-61), he moves from discussing the allegorical opening to 54 that gives a sense that the Second World War never finished, to discussing the apocalyptic future of our planet, drawing strongly on Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us*, before returning to the idea of *impegno* in what seems a desultory ramble. In some ways it could be seen as resembling Benjamin’s style in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and elsewhere; although less aphoristic, it has a tendency towards incompleteness and unexpected jumps at times that, as in Benjamin’s texts, are



designed to destabilise the traditional style of academic criticism. This also goes some way towards accounting for the controversial reception of the Memorandum.

Wu Ming 1 says of Jones that she herself points out that her text is a failure (43n36), and, I believe, he is equally aware of the shortcomings of the Memorandum. As mentioned earlier, he did not aim to give a full account of what the New Italian Epic was, but rather to raise these issues and start the debate, handing the baton on to critics and readers to develop them. The three different versions, supplemented by footnotes and containing crossed out or disappeared passages all show that this was not a perfect attempt, but it was an experiment, to raise questions that needed answering and to find new forms for discussing Italian literature in the twenty-first century. The Memorandum may simply be the beginning of a debate, but it is replete with ideas and references that provide a rich framework for analysing the texts in the New Italian Epic nebula and beyond. It brings out the key themes of the phenomenon – disillusionment with, and a need to take responsibility for, the Italian contemporary situation, Italy's problematic history, the blurred lines between fact and fiction – that appear again and again in the texts of the nebula. Wu Ming 1's awareness of the tensions that arise from his discussion can be detected in the fact that he inscribed them into the name of the phenomenon itself, which embodies the combination of continuity and rupture I have brought to the fore: it contains the seemingly oxymoronic combination of new and epic, whilst also calling itself Italian but in English. An analysis of the Memorandum demonstrates that something was indeed happening in Italian literature, that ideas were coming together in various texts that contained similar concerns and styles, but, as the name of the phenomenon hints, these ideas were not necessarily completely new, only Italian, or purely epic.

## ~ CHAPTER TWO ~

### **Periodisation: 1993, 2001, 2008+**

There are three key points in time that have been associated with the development of the New Italian Epic phenomenon, which Wu Ming 1 describes as follows:

Il sottotitolo del memorandum indicava un preciso arco temporale, un periodo di tre lustri, dal 1993 (anno del crollo della ‘Prima Repubblica’) al 2008 (anno del grande bagno di sangue della sinistra italiana, ma anche – lo capiremo andando avanti – ultimo anno di gloria del berlusconismo), con un ‘giro di boa’, un salto di livello situato all’altezza del 2001 (G8 di Genova, 11 Settembre) (2010a).

In this chapter, I will address each of these points in time in chronological order. Where possible, this contextualisation of the New Italian Epic will be supported with textual examples taken from the nebula, illustrating how this background has shaped the very writing of these unidentified narrative objects. Whilst 2001 can certainly be seen as a key turning point both on a national and international level, I will extend Wu Ming’s insistence on the year 1993 into a more general period from the appearance of so-called migrant writing in the early nineties to 1996 when the anthology *Gioventù cannibale* appeared, and I take 2008 to be from that point until the present, as we cannot necessarily see an artificial cut-off point for the New Italian Epic in that year, nor chart the phenomenon’s demise yet.

This analysis will give a more profound sense of the developments that have shaped the style and approach to their subject matter that the writers associated with the nebula

display in different ways, moving beyond simply the national historical moments that Wu Ming 1 describes to take in wider changes. This is particularly necessary concerning the literary humus the New Italian Epic grew out of, given the notable emphasis of Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum on the newness of the phenomenon, so that other writers and literary experiences that contain fruitful parallels with the texts of the nebula tend to be omitted in many discussions of the phenomenon. At the same time, we can detect a sense both of ownership and of nostalgia for previous experiences of political struggle in discussions of the protests in 2001 at the G8 in Genoa, in what could be seen as an attempt to create a defining moment for a generation who were children in the protest decades of the 1960s and 1970s. This is part of Wu Ming 1's attempt in the Memorandum and elsewhere to create a common narrative of periodisation for his generation, a national biography of those born in and around the seventies that focusses on highly emotionalised events. Not only does this exclude some elements that might not fit into the narrative but are relevant too, but it also tends to be cast in a peculiarly national light, focussing on developments in Italy rather than placing them in a broader, transnational context, as I will attempt to do here. Whether deliberate or not, there is a sense in Wu Ming 1's discussions of the New Italian Epic of him 'selling' a particular narrative to us, which I seek here to problematise. This chapter risks fragmentation due to the many possible avenues suggested by the key years he outlines, but following and extending these various paths should give a more articulated overview of the humus for the New Italian Epic.

## **1993**

As described in the previous chapter, 1993 has been seen as an important foundational moment for the New Italian Epic. The phenomenon was born of both positive and negative

developments, such as the end of the Cold War and the ensuing liberation of energies, the fall of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the *Mani pulite* investigations, all of which contributed to a profound shake-up of the Italian political establishment and ushered in the years of Berlusconi's influence over the country. Although it is not mentioned in the Memorandum, these were also the first years of the internet, bringing with it the vast expansion of the media landscape. This influenced the transmedial New Italian Epic texts and the ways in which the phenomenon has taken shape online and through blogs. It was also instrumental to the Luther Blissett Project, which started in 1994 and employed a variety of media platforms and communication strategies that these new technological developments allowed, seeing itself, in the words of Deseriis, as 'a "Robin Hood of the Information Age"' (2011: 79).

Yet, it was not simply changing historical conditions, but historiography itself that experienced a shake-up at the beginning of that decade, which undoubtedly also affected the concerns that are at the centre of the New Italian Epic. From the late eighties onwards, memory studies have grown in importance (Erl 2010: 1), broadening history as a discipline, as I described in the introduction to this study. Foot has rightly argued that Italian history since the Risorgimento can be characterised by the idea of divided memory, due to the disagreements surrounding events and their commemoration that endure today.<sup>79</sup> He also points out that the term 'la memoria divisa' was first used in the nineties, when alternative versions of the events of the Second World War began to come to light and be addressed by historians: 'the idea of divided memory relates to a specific set of events and historical

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<sup>79</sup> 'Italian memories have often been divided. Events have been interpreted in contrasting ways, and the facts themselves are often contested. It has proved extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any group – public or private – to create a consensus around the past, or around ways of remembering that past. Various groups – be they regional, ethnic, political – have demanded that their memories be acknowledged. Individual events as well as history itself have been understood in a bewildering variety of ways. The state and other public bodies have rarely been able to build durable and commonly agreed practices of commemoration. There has been no closure, no "truth" and little reconciliation' (Foot 2010: 1).

research, emerging in part from a post-cold war opening out of research into the past' (2010: 10). Beginning with the publication of books such as Claudio Pavone's seminal *Una guerra civile* in 1991, and the study of alternative, family memories and oral history, the accepted version of the Resistance and the myths surrounding it began to be substantially revised,<sup>80</sup> and this had a knock-on effect of reassessing other historical events. It is no coincidence that so many of the New Italian Epic writers have chosen to look at such contested historical moments as the fascist period, the Second World War and Italian colonisation, and in doing so place emphasis on modes of understanding history, as I will discuss in chapter four. If Italian history is characterised by divided memory, so is its recent literature, which has used these divisions fruitfully to explore different bifurcations of the past.

Italian national history in this period also started to be reframed in a more transnational context, although this is not referred to by Wu Ming 1 in his periodisation, which tends to be seen as part of a specifically Italian set of conditions, as I argued in the previous chapter. Holocaust memory, which was associated in Italy with the figure of Primo Levi, opened up from the mid-1980s onwards to become part of what Gordon has described as a broader Americanisation of the Holocaust in the nineties, with Levi 'as a central figure in testimony and world literature' (Gordon 2006: 94). In the wake of 'the post-Cold War reconfiguration of Europe and its emerging postcolonialities' (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 2), the Italian colonial project also began to be re-examined, and it was placed within a wider understanding of postcolonial studies. The New Italian Epic grew out of this climate of both questioning the accepted version of history and creating historical links across national boundaries. We can see this reflected in the nebula in the texts that examine colonialism (see

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<sup>80</sup> This climate is reflected in Wu Ming's project *La prima volta che ho visto i fascisti*, which collected testimony from various people on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of 25<sup>th</sup> April. The text, freely available to download online, contains: 'pagine di diario, frammenti, racconti, reminiscenze, visioni febbrili. Testi curati o tenuti per anni in un cassetto della mente, rovesciati sulla pagina d'istinto, di getto, senza preoccupazioni di estetica o di stile' (Wu Ming 2005: 8).

chapter four), and also, for example, in Janeczek's *Le rondini di Montecassino* (2010), which revisits the Battle of Montecassino through the eyes of a Texan sergeant, the grandson of a Maori veteran, teenagers from Rome of Polish and Indian descent, and Janeczek's own ancestors, mixing memories, postmemory and autobiography with historical accounts in a transnational rethinking of this famous event in the Second World War that reflects on migration and commemoration today.<sup>81</sup>

Here I would also like to underline the importance of the literary backdrop of the early nineties, and indeed of the nineties as a whole, in shaping the concerns and styles that the nebula would later demonstrate, which is overlooked in Wu Ming 1's and many other critics' discussions of the hummus of the New Italian Epic. The first overlooked landmark that I would like to discuss was the arrival of so-called migrant writing in Italy, which Burns described as

the arrival of a new *io*—and a new *noi*—in Italian literature: where women writers in the '60s-'70s in particular had established new voices telling stories of new experiences, or sometimes familiar experiences told from a different point of view, and so had written a new set of subjecthoods and perhaps a new consciousness into the Italian canon, now writers from different cultures were initiating an analogous process, attempting to mark out a specific cultural territory in which different voices describing a different Italy and a different notion of Italian-ness might be heard and responded to (2007: 136-7).

The effects of Italian literature opening up to incorporate these new, transnational experiences continues to be felt in the twenty-first century. Significantly, in describing

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<sup>81</sup> Although *Le rondini di Montecassino* was published after the Memorandum appeared, it clearly fits into the nebula alongside Janeczek's previous work due to similar concerns about history and memory, explored in an experimental and autofictional narrative.

particular areas of interest for migrant writers, Burns individuates an engagement with ‘the myth of Italy’ (2007: 147), which cannot but resonate with the New Italian Epic and its concern with mythopoesis. The use of microhistories in the New Italian Epic as a means of rethinking the mainstream historical narrative, looking at history from a subaltern perspective, would seem to be carrying forward Burns’ ‘new set of subjecthoods’ that migrant writing heralded. The strand of the historical novels in the nebula that is concerned with re-examining Italy’s colonial past successfully thinks through a non-Italian experience of colonisation in some cases, as we will see in Wu Ming 2 and Mohamed’s *Timira* (2012) in chapter four, although others are less successful in this regard, and, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, the nebula is rather short on texts by migrant writers.

Arguably, the multilingual quality of many of the New Italian Epic texts can also be linked to the new voices of migrant writing in the nineties, which sometimes had elements from other languages spoken by their writers, containing ‘evidence of writers disrupting or playing with Italian in gently subversive ways’ (Burns 2007: 142), although this could be done through more subtle ‘alternative systems of signification and expression’ (Burns 2007: 143), aside from the simple insertion of foreign words into a standard Italian narrative. This approach can be seen in the nebula in *Regina di fiori e di perle* by Ghermandi, whose use of language Lombardi-Diop describes in the text’s ‘Postfazione’: ‘La lingua stessa del romanzo, un italiano essenziale e asciutto ma arricchito dalle metafore, dagli stilemi, dalle forme e dai termini dell’immaginario espressivo dell’amharico e della sua cultura quotidiana, fa dell’italiano una lingua nuova’ (2007: 309). Yet there is also a sense of Italian becoming a new language or being disrupted in the dialects that we often see in the New Italian Epic texts – from De Cataldo’s rendering of the different regional cadences of his characters in *Romanzo criminale* and *Nelle mani giuste*, to Camilleri’s Sicilian-Italian hybrid language – as well as the frequent presence of colloquial language, slang and foreign words in the nebula.

Whilst it contains the word ‘Italian’ in its name, the New Italian Epic offers an articulated and current picture of Italian identity. We could see a connection between these recent writers’ tendency to move away from standard Italian and the presence of Burns’ ‘different notion of Italian-ness’ that sprang from migrant writing.

The texts by migrant writers in the nineties could also in some cases be called ‘unidentified narrative objects’, incorporating a mix of personal experience, political and historical concerns, and fiction, just as the New Italian Epic writers do. Brioni made this point in a recent interview with Wu Ming 1:

È significativo notare che il 1993, la data che indichi nel Memorandum come l’inizio di una nuova sensibilità narrativa, coincida con la pubblicazione di tre testi fondamentali – o, per utilizzare il lessico del Memorandum, tre ‘oggetti narrativi non identificati’ seppur con una chiara ispirazione autobiografica –, i primi che raccontano il colonialismo italiano dalla parte dei colonizzati, vale a dire *Scirscir N’Demna/Andiamo a spasso* di Maria Abebù Viarengo, *Aulò. Canto Poesia dell’Eritrea* di Ribka Sibhatu, e il romanzo autobiografico *Lontano da Mogadiscio* di Shirin Ramzanali Fazel. Seppur adottando una prospettiva del tutto diversa rispetto a quella del NIE, anche questi lavori si concentrano sulla congiunzione, la tensione, e la giustapposizione di macro- e micro-storia in relazione alla condizione postcoloniale del mondo in cui viviamo (Brioni 2014: 279).

Wu Ming 1 responded by mentioning writers like Scego and Ghermandi, who were admitted into the nebula soon after the Memorandum appeared, and states: ‘È evidente che quando parli di rimosso e di rovesciamento dello sguardo sul colonialismo non puoi non impattare con questo tipo di produzione letteraria’ (Brioni 2014: 280). He does not elaborate much more on this point, and his discussion of postcolonial literature seems to be very much



concerned with other ideas, such as Italy being treated as a colony by the United States during the Cold War (277), Italy's internal colonialism and the north-south divide (277-8), or Wu Ming's tendency to write about the past from the point of view of characters 'dalla parte sbagliata della storia' (287). As we shall see with other preceding literary experiences, there does not seem to be a full acknowledgement of the influence of migrant writing on the New Italian Epic nebula, even six years after the Memorandum appeared.

Another key element of nineties literature in Italy, and equally overlooked as an influence on the New Italian Epic experience, were the *giovani cannibali*, young writers who foreshadowed certain elements of both the style and approach of the texts in the nebula, despite obvious differences that may obscure their importance. The Cannibals gained their name from an anthology of short stories, *Gioventù cannibale*, which appeared in 1996 and was highly successful in terms of sales, if not in terms of critical reception.<sup>82</sup> The stories were collected and edited by Daniele Brolli, and were tied together by a mutual focus on young, disaffected protagonists, who found themselves in extreme situations of a violent and sometimes sexually violent nature, described using colloquial language and at times black humour. Their combination of gratuitous violence and pop culture references meant that this type of writing was also referred to as 'pulp', a nod to the influence of Quentin Tarantino's 1994 cult film *Pulp Fiction*.<sup>83</sup> The stories tended to take place in urban environments, often on peripheries, where the protagonists came into contact with, or were already part of, the city's seedy underworld. Their writers were very much preoccupied with the sinister effects of ubiquitous television and advertising in late-capitalist society, and often painted damning

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<sup>82</sup> One of the Einaudi editors who helped create the anthology and Einaudi's *Stile libero* series, Cesari, later described: 'venisse amata e odiata, impugnata come una bandiera, vendesse negli anni quasi cinquantamila copie, dopo aver riempito di prodotti succedanei (interviste, polemiche, stroncature, recensioni) tutti i giornali: e che in definitiva, per dirlo in una parola, *diventasse un marchio*' (2003).

<sup>83</sup> Nerenberg also points out that the pulp label referred to 'the cheap, low-grade paper on which sensationalizing fiction was first published. Of common (read: low) origin, the coarse paper stock seemed to be a judgement on the kind of literature printed on it. Pulp was popular, not necessarily "good"' (2012: 136).

pictures of empty, mindless consumption, like the people described in Nove's 'Il mondo dell'amore', who go to the 'Iper' every Saturday: 'non sanno che cazzo fare, e vanno a vedere gli stereo da 280,000 lire senza il compact' (Brolli 1996: 53).

In his introduction to *Gioventù cannibale*, Brolli argued against an Italian tradition that he felt had excluded such experiences from literature:

il moralismo italiano ha censurato con efficacia ogni possibilità di portare nella narrazione gli effetti devastanti delle pulsioni primarie [...] il sangue deve essere omesso, come se il suo apparire decretasse lo scivolare del romanzo verso la cronaca. La cronaca è sicuramente fonte di storie [...] Ma la tradizione del racconto italiano non le ammette nell'ambito della letteratura se non accompagnate da un'interpretazione morale o ideologica [...] È l'incombere di un pedagogismo scellerato che per evitare il male censura ogni forma di racconto dell'esperienza (1996: vi-vii).

By merging *fatti di cronaca* with literary narration, and eschewing any ideology, reassurance or moral message for their readers, he believed the writers included in the anthology could truly represent experience today. They were portrayed in his introduction as brave enough to antagonise social and literary norms, calling into question the Italian cultural establishment.<sup>84</sup> Brolli saw the anthology itself not simply as a collection of stories, but as a literary watershed moment: 'il segnale di una svolta dell'immaginario, che esce dal limbo della cultura recintato dal moralismo per appropriarsi di una lingua senza compromessi' (1996: x).

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<sup>84</sup> In *Cuore di pulp*, a related anthology published a year after *Gioventù cannibale*, the editors Giovannini and Tentori expressed comparable criticism of the snobbery of Italian critics. Lucamante states: 'Though articulated in slightly different terms, the points of Brolli's preface and the opinions of Giovannini and Tentori express the same kind of contempt for the way certain Italian scholars view their role as critics, the role of writers in general, and the responsibility these writers should have toward so-called high art' (2001a: 18).

Whilst Brolli insisted on the newness of this phenomenon, the Cannibals' genealogy, like that of the New Italian Epic, was characterised by both continuity and rupture. This is encapsulated in their very name, which alternatively evokes the Dadaist magazine *Le Cannibale*,<sup>85</sup> Andrea Pazienza's *fumetti*,<sup>86</sup> and 'the intrinsic notion of appropriation, with the subsequent mutation of previous literary approaches and tradition that lies at the core of this new narrative trend' (Lucamante 2001a: 15). The literary antecedents that contributed to the formation of these young writers were in some aspects strikingly similar to that of the New Italian Epic. Lucamante points out that, although the stories often took place in Rome or Milan, Emilia Romagna, and particularly Bologna, was an important locus for the *giovani cannibali*:

Pier Vittorio Tondelli and his *Under 25* project for the formation of a literary workshop in Emilia; the DAMS (Dipartimento di Arte, Musica e Spettacolo), the famous school for artistic studies; 'Ricercare. Laboratorio di nuove scritture', the annual meeting in Reggio Emilia organized by Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli hosting emerging contemporary authors from the worlds of both poetry and narrative: all these elements contributed, and contribute still, to give sustenance to the fertile humus for aspiring writers (2001a: 19).

Testament to these elements continuing to contribute to this humus is the New Italian Epic, which primarily sprang from the same environment, as outlined in the previous chapter.

There were also many innovations in these narratives that had not been seen in previous literary experiences, or not to such an extent. In contrast to the new narratives of the

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<sup>85</sup> As pointed out by Antonello (2001: 40), who in the same article explores the avant-garde elements of the phenomenon, connecting it to both Futurism and the Gruppo 63, and exploring the specificities of the Italian avant-garde in comparison with its French counterpart.

<sup>86</sup> Cesari later said: 'Che poi quell'aggettivo, *cannibale*, venisse da lontano, dagli anni e dai fumetti di Andrea Pazienza – *siamo una generazione cannibale* – è anche possibile' (2003).

eighties and very early nineties, the Cannibal label saw a number of women writers coming to the fore – Silvia Ballestra, Simona Vinci, Isabella Santacroce, Rossana Campo, and Francesca Mazzucato – who not only challenged literary convention in Italy but also feminist convention, as Lucamante (2001b) has explored.<sup>87</sup> It could be argued that the New Italian Epic falls short of their legacy in its limited inclusion of female writing and reflections on female subjectivity in the nebula, which, as I stated in the previous chapter, is very much male-dominated in its writers and themes.

*Gioventù cannibale* was also one of the first texts to appear as part of Einaudi's Stile Libero series, which is undoubtedly linked to the fortunes of the New Italian Epic writers too. At a time of crisis at Einaudi in terms of its identity and finances, Stile Libero was created by Severino Cesari and Paolo Repetti 'nel segno di compresenze, contaminazioni, ibridazioni e assemblaggi tra linguaggi diversissimi: letteratura e spettacolo, fumetti e video, manuali e sottogeneri narrativi, *giallo* e *noir*, comico e fantascienza, memorie e altro ancora. Sono quasi sempre libri-novità, spesso con videocassetta o dvd' (Ferretti and Ianuzzi 2014: 294). The mix of genres, styles and media that we see in the nebula can be clearly linked to this innovative approach coming from a mainstream publisher. Stile Libero also tended towards new and transgressive writers, including those that would later become part of the New Italian Epic phenomenon, such as Lucarelli, Pincio and Luther Blissett/Wu Ming (Ferretti and Ianuzzi 2014: 294-5).

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<sup>87</sup> 'By making use of this relatively new space made available to them, the novels by the Italian female Cannibal writers construct a new image of Italian culture and of Italian women, both of which are a far cry from those presented by programmatic feminists of the 1970s like Dacia Maraini. These images, however, are also very different from those presented by the more traditional Italian women writers, so one might say that the feminist writing of the 1970s paved the way to the creation of new gender parameters that characterize a major women's narrative *genre* of the 1990s' (Lucamante 2001b: 100).

In her assessment of pulp narratives, Mondello argues that what was truly original about these writers was the way in which they included 'un variegato catalogo della contemporaneità' in literature (2007: 10). She goes on to list elements of this catalogue:

Neotelevisione, sistema delle merci, iperconsumismo, i nuovi luoghi/nonluoghi della vita individuale e collettiva. Mettono in scena la condizione giovanile, i conflitti generazionali, l'universo cognitivo ed emozionale degli under trenta. Sanciscono l'ingresso nel parlato di nuovi codici linguistici ed espressivi, con ampi prelievi dalla gergalità, dai subcodici delle tribù giovanili, dalle citazioni per iniziati di un sound che funziona come una colonna musicale continua della pagina scritta (2007: 10).

Nerenberg describes such a mixture of modern elements present in this type of fiction in terms of the practice of sampling taken from hip-hop and rap music: 'Sampling lifts a recognizable portion of a popular song [...] and interpolates it into a new and different song. It is intrusive and deliberate. It exacts recognition' (2012: 140); these writers took the practice beyond music to different types of popular cultural expression. According to Mondello, by such innovation in their narratives, these young writers were not simply reflecting contemporary society, but examining how the self is constructed in this society, bringing to the fore 'il problema del legame tra consumo e identità/immagine di sé/appartenenza al gruppo di riferimento nelle giovani generazioni, interrogandosi sul ruolo di ciò che in tale sistema consumi/identità viene riconosciuto ufficialmente come "consumo culturale", in particolare quello dei media' (2007: 11-12). The Cannibal writers were bringing under the microscope selfhood and subjectivity for the new generation in the world of 1990s Italy.

Some of these elements can of course be seen as characteristic of postmodernist literature, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, tends towards incorporating so-called

‘low’ culture to reflect the present reality. Benedetti argues that Italian postmodernist writing did not engage with the contemporary, changing cultural realm in this way as much as American postmodernist writers did (1998: 57). Aside from the shortcomings I have already discussed in her view of late twentieth century literary production, this also overlooks the chapter of Italian postmodernism that was Cannibal writing. The way in which Benedetti describes the work of American postmodernist writers like Pynchon or Barthelme could be applied to what the Cannibal writers were doing:

queste narrazioni parlano la lingua babelica della nuova *koiné* metropolitana, attraversata da tutti gli scarti del ciclo tecnologico e del mercato culturale, piena di spazzatura mediale [...] ed è attraverso questo linguaggio ibrido che esse si affacciano su di una spazialità inquietante, e pongono il soggetto davanti alla metropoli e ai suoi enigmi, in una ulteriore catastrofe del senso, in paesaggi periferici e desolati, tra svincoli e raccordi autostradali (1998: 56-7).

It is precisely these landscapes, this language and the cultural industry of the contemporary world that the Cannibal writers were portraying. They were writing about the social catastrophes and the extreme possibilities of the modern metropolis around the same time as Benedetti wrote these words. These writers’ approach can in some ways be seen as close to American postmodernist fiction in this approach.

Such reflections of contemporary life are also present throughout the New Italian Epic, part of their ‘attitudine popolare’, as Wu Ming 1 calls it (2009a: 32). The oral element present in many New Italian Epic texts, as mentioned above in relation to migrant writing, harks back to Mondello’s description of the Cannibal writers’ inclusion of ‘nuovi codici linguistici ed espressivi, con ampi prelievi dalla gergalità’ (2007: 10). At times, we can also encounter the Cannibal technique of the soundtrack to the narrative in the nebula: this is

present most obviously in De Michele's trilogy, made up of *Tre uomini paradossali*, *Scirocco* and *La visione del cieco*, which features a large number of musical references, and *Scirocco* even lists an 'Original soundtrack' at the end (De Michele 2005: 587). Jones' *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* also includes various songs in the background of the narrative, from Madonna's 'Material Girl' (Jones 2007: 17-18) to 'Animals' by Pink Floyd (Jones 2007: 23). Evangelisti's *Ciclo del metallo* trilogy, described by Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum as 'epopea della nascita del capitalismo industriale',<sup>88</sup> includes elements taken from heavy metal music, graphic novels, sci-fi/fantasy and history. In *Una storia romantica*, analysed in chapter four, Scurati borrowed from a wide range of different media in line with Nerenberg's description of the technique of sampling in Cannibal fiction, and created what he describes as 'una tipologia piuttosto varia di prestiti da opere altrui, riusi di temi e motivi, visitazioni e rivisitazioni di luoghi comuni, spesso celebri, dell'immaginario letterario o artistico, colto o popolare che fosse' (Scurati 2007: 547). In his list of references at the end of the novel, he includes alongside Henry James and Ivan Turgenev (558), Sergio Leone's film *Once Upon a Time in America* (560), and Franco Battiato and Manlio Sgalambro's song 'La cura' (562). We can certainly detect the widening of the cultural realm that has been associated with the postmodern condition by Jameson (1991: 64) in both Cannibal writing and the New Italian Epic.

The generational issues that Mondello sees as integral to the Cannibal writers are also a stalwart of the New Italian Epic phenomenon, as I will discuss in the next chapter in

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<sup>88</sup> '54 uscì nella primavera del 2002. Quasi in contemporanea giunse in libreria - pubblicato dal nostro stesso editore - *Black Flag* di Valerio Evangelisti, che all'epoca non conoscevo di persona. *Black Flag* è il secondo capitolo del *Ciclo del Metallo*, epopea della nascita del capitalismo industriale, che l'autore rappresenta come manifestazione di Ogun, divinità yoruba dei metalli, delle miniere, delle lame, della macellazione. /Aprendo il romanzo, scoprimmo che il primo capitolo era al tempo stesso un *trompe-l'oeil* e un'allegoria molto simile alla nostra. *In exergo* una frase di George W. Bush sul bisogno di rispondere al terrore, poi l'apertura: le torri in fiamme, cadaveri, persone che vagano per strada coperte di polvere di cemento e amianto. Qualcuno si chiede: "Perché tutto questo?", qualcuno altro dice: "Nulla sarà più come prima". /Solo che non è l'11 settembre 2001. /E' l'attacco a Panama da parte degli Stati Uniti, 20 dicembre 1989. /Zanne di animali chimerici affondate nelle carni, il Cielo pieno d'acciaio e Fumi' (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 7-8).

conjunction with ideas surrounding paternity, where I also suggest that this is linked to the society of consumption that their nineties precursors were similarly reflecting on. Indeed, the effects of consumerism and the mass media that preoccupied the Cannibal writers are frequently depicted by the New Italian Epic writers too. This can be seen in Saviano's description in *Gomorra* of the Camorra system, linking it to capitalism and showing how it interacts with mafia portrayals on screen, which I discuss in chapter five, or in Genna's portrayal of the fashion industry and a modern world of empty enjoyment in *Fine impero*,<sup>89</sup> as well as in a culturally barren contemporary Italy in his *Italia De Profundis*, analysed in the next chapter. Perhaps the New Italian Epic writer who focusses the most on issues related to the society of consumption is Siti in his autofictional texts, which show the darker elements of contemporary experience.<sup>90</sup> Such autofiction is widespread in the New Italian Epic nebula, and it brings to the fore issues related to the self and the world in a way distinct from the Cannibal writers, but with similar concerns about subjectivity in a society characterised by an unstable relationship with reality, as we will see in more detail later.

An area of both contact and departure between the New Italian Epic and their nineties pulp precursors is to be found in the use of *fatti di cronaca*. If the short stories of the *cannibali* used true crime stories from the newspapers, these stories were of the

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<sup>89</sup> The protagonist is a failed writer working as a fashion journalist. He finds himself at endless drug-fuelled parties reminiscent of Sorrentino's film *La grande bellezza*, with the charismatic character Zio Bubba, who tells him: 'Tu devi divertirti. Non esiste altro' (Genna 2013: 99). In true Cannibal style – I am thinking particularly of Matteo Curtoni's story 'Treccine bionde' in Brolli (1995) – one of the models seemingly dies of an overdose on one occasion, and those at the party only wish to distance themselves from this event, showing little sympathy, although she is later revived. Death and consumerism/enjoyment constantly overlap, as the cube-like building where the protagonist attends a fashion show reminds him of where he buried his father (73), the runway itself displays 'Una forma compulsiva di sostituzione dei corpi, ognuno all'altro simile, delle dimensioni disumane e delle proporzioni disturbate' (81), and eventually he sees the endless parties as 'una maschera, della morte' (186).

<sup>90</sup> This can be seen in Siti's 2008 text *Il contagio*, which is mentioned in the Memorandum (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 15n), and particularly in *Troppi paradisi* (2006), which has a very similar approach and similar concerns, therefore I include it in the nebula too. *Troppi paradisi* portrays a society dominated by reality TV and an obsession with body image. Siti may put more of himself into his text than the Cannibal writers did, but his concerns are very much aligned with theirs. Alongside his eloquent descriptions of today's world, Siti's text also includes oral, everyday, regionally-specific language, as seen in Marcello's speech, for example: 'Io nun ciò fame, si te vòl cucinà te un po' de pasta' (283).



sensationalist, tabloid variety, about sex, drugs and cold-blooded violence. The underlying explanation for the violence that unfolds in the stories of Cannibal writers tends to be traceable back to the insidious influence of drugs, music, television or videogames, which suggests an alarmist, arguably conservative, attitude to modern life, but there is a more complex operation going on. They mirror the moral panic that surrounded the developing youth culture of the time, and bring to the fore the implications of a highly mediated world for the ways in which people relate to one another and to extreme violence.<sup>91</sup> They tend to take contemporary societal developments to their lurid but logical extremes in order to encourage their readers to view them critically, in a way that is comparable to Bret Easton Ellis' 1991 novel *American Psycho*. As Brolli points out, there is no didactic comment from their narrators, or moral judgement. At times, the writers offer little insight into their stories, but simply unfold them before the readers' eyes, often with stark testimony from narrators who show little compassion or understanding of the gravity of their actions. This approach is typified in the opening story of Nove's collection of (very short) stories, *Superwoobinda*, which begins with the lines: 'Ho amazzato i miei genitori perché usavano un bagnoschiuma assurdo, Pure & Vegetal' (1998: 7). Nove's brief fragments often end mid-sentence, which gives a sense of the television channel being changed as the reader zaps between different stories, resisting a more profound analysis in a way that mirrors the short attention span associated with television watching. Issues related to television spectatorship can also be detected in some of the fragments of Nove's *Superwoobinda* that engage with real historical

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<sup>91</sup> I find Galianzo's 'Cose che io no so' in *Gioventù cannibale* particularly interesting from this point of view. The female narrator is writing to a murderer and rapist who attacked and killed his own family, and she begins by describing her parents avidly following his story on television – 'Sono affamati di brutte notizie' (Brolli 1996: 103-4) – which, in a twist of postmodern irony, implicates the reader / spectator too in this hunger for such stories. Later, the narrator tells him: 'facendo quelle cose che hai fatto, hai reso tutti più buoni, ci hai reso tutti più buoni' (117). Like the journalist we later see trying in vain to question the killer on his motivations, we may claim a desire to understand, when we really use these stories to shore ourselves up, as a sort of catharsis. However, no real catharsis is offered by Galianzo, or any of the Cannibal writers; no comfort is proffered by the anthology, which is so frequently hard to stomach. We must think about why – or not – we chose to turn our gaze towards their violence, and we must reach our own conclusions about the implications of what we have read.

events in his readers' memory, such as 'La strage di via Palestro', in which the narrator finds his visit to the site of the bomb attack less real than watching it on television - 'ero triste, ma meno che guardando la televisione, perché alla televisione tutto sembra più vero, e i collegamenti sono immediati, la strage ti entra in casa all'improvviso, non c'è calcolo, nessuno dice "andiamo alla strage", succede' (1998: 28) – or 'Vermicino', in which the narrator recalls the news story from the eighties of Alfredino Rampi, the boy who was trapped in a well and later died, his fate being covered almost constantly on television – the narrator posits that if it happened now they would attempt to interrupt the coverage with advertisements (1998: 24). Whilst there is not open or lengthy analysis of the news stories that are incorporated into their narratives, and the Cannibal writers distanced themselves from ideas of *impegno* (Lucamante 2001a: 22), they raised issues about modern life and engaged with their present reality.

I chose the two examples of real-life events addressed by Nove in particular, as both events are also treated in New Italian Epic texts. The former not specifically, but De Cataldo's *Nelle mani giuste* addresses the various *stragi* of 1992-3 that the mafia perpetrated against the state, as I examine in the following chapter. De Cataldo imagines the machinations that lay behind these bomb attacks, portraying a power struggle that the end of the First Republic set in motion. Genna addresses the story of Alfredino Rampi in *Dies irae*, interweaving it with autofiction, conspiracy theories and a science fiction story. These two examples bring to light the difference in approach to *fatti di cronaca*, which for New Italian Epic writers are a starting point for prolonged, book-length explorations of the issues surrounding them, and they are combined with detailed reconstructions, fictionalising and often autobiographical elements. The choice to engage in more detailed explorations of *fatti di cronaca* could be seen as a deliberate one on the part of New Italian Epic writers to combat the fragmentary, brief and superficial treatment that such stories typically receive from the

television and mass media. The Cannibal writers reflected this situation, but were not seen to be working against it. Wu Ming, in their former incarnation as Luther Blissett, claimed: ‘seppelliamo il minimalismo autobiografico dei giovani scrittori “pulp” e rilanciamo il grande romanzo. Torniamo a privilegiare la scelta di intraprendere grandi narrazioni’.<sup>92</sup>

In his 2006 essay *La letteratura dell'inesperienza. Scrivere romanzi al tempo della televisione*, Scurati argues that there is a need for a more profound and critical approach in literature in our highly mediated world that he claims is characterised by a lack of direct experience. Indeed, Scurati describes precisely the environment that the Cannibal stories portrayed: ‘I fattori storici che producono come risultato l'inesperienza della cultura di massa sono [...] principalmente tre: il capitalismo trionfante, le tecnologie del visuale artificiale, la comunicazione intesa come logica culturale propria delle nuove tecnologie della visione’ (2006: 48). Although they are never named, his argument seems to be against the kind of writing that characterised Italian pulp fiction; to combat the inexperience that has been compensated with a ‘proliferazione di violenze immaginarie’ (2006: 46), he concludes that the historical novel form is a solution: ‘qualsiasi romanzo si scriva, anche il più ferocemente autobiografico, il più ingenuamente attuale, lo si scrive come un romanzo storico’ (2006: 78). Scurati's *Il sopravvissuto* (2005) and *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo* (2010) seem to be attempts to fulfil this aim for Scurati: they start from the sort of news stories typical to Cannibal writing – the former tells the story of a boy who walked into school and shot all of his teachers except one,<sup>93</sup> the latter looks at a case of a paedophile ring in northern Italy – but

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<sup>92</sup> See [http://www.lutherblissett.net/archive/371\\_it.html](http://www.lutherblissett.net/archive/371_it.html) (accessed 07.08.15). See also Luther Blissett's interview with Loredana Lipperini, in which they said: ‘Non ne possiamo più di raccontini basati su un'unica idea, e spesso nemmeno su quella, che si riducono a esercizi di stile, libricoli pseudo-autobiografici e generazionali’ (Lipperini 1999).

<sup>93</sup> Interestingly in terms of periodisation, the book ends on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2001 as the school year is about to begin. The teacher protagonist, Andrea, has come to a realisation that his lesson on 20<sup>th</sup> century history and his comment on genocide may have contributed to his student Vitaliano's terrible crime. As he is about to go back to school, any hope the reader may have is undermined by the significance of the date, as another massacre, this time in the twenty-first century, is about to take place.

Scurati's approach is one of deepening, putting forward various ideas about why these instances of inter-generational violence happened, and taking his readers on imaginary journeys into the motivations of the various protagonists involved. His explorations open up to more general considerations on generational problems, moral issues and the media that are discussed at length and directly, rather than only hinted at.<sup>94</sup> Donnarumma states of *Il sopravvissuto*: 'la riflessione del professore sopravvissuto rifiuta infatti i facili sociologismi del giornalismo e del pensiero comune e, insieme, tenta di recuperare proprio quell'esperienza che il saggio dà per spacciata' (2008b: 48). Scurati, in common with other New Italian Epic writers, expresses a sense that novels can give a more profound insight into the real-life events they engage with in this way. The Cannibal writers raised issues that the New Italian Epic writers have taken in a different direction, but both experiences question the way in which we interact with news stories, and how we interpret the flow of information that we are bombarded with in the modern world.<sup>95</sup>

Nove's trajectory as a writer in some ways illustrates the transition from nineties narratives to the twenty-first century climate of what Antonello and Mussnug have characterised as *Postmodern Impegno* (2009). Nove moved from being a mainstay of the Cannibal movement to publishing an overtly politically committed text in 2006, *Mi chiamo Roberta, ho 40 anni, guadagno 250 euro al mese....*. Here, he gathered testimony from real people about their experiences of the world of work and placed it alongside his own commentary on the contemporary situation, complete with autobiographical details. The text

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<sup>94</sup> See chapter five for a more detailed discussion of the New Italian Epic's approach to news stories.

<sup>95</sup> Mondello makes a similar argument when she points out the continuity between the writing of the nineties that she analyses and the later work of Luther Blissett/Wu Ming; she states that, despite obvious differences, both experiences address 'il tema della mitopoiesi, ossia della produzione e manipolazione dei miti e dell'immaginario in questa fase storica' (2007: 56). She also says that the increasing presence of television in the young writers of the nineties reached its culmination in the presence of a television set as a character in Wu Ming's *54*, in which it no longer transmitted anything (2007: 78-9); as in the writings that came before, it acts as 'un elemento attivo su cui riflettere in quanto produttore di immaginario, di memoria e di azioni quotidiane' (2007: 81).

is perhaps another surprising omission from the New Italian Epic nebula, being an unidentified narrative object with a sense of *impegno*. Naturally, it displays clear links with the Cannibal experience, which he re-addresses in the light of the current economic crisis.

It opens with the observation that, in *Superwoobinda*, Nove had written about a generation of thirty-somethings who did not have a future, and ten years later he sees that the future still has not arrived: ‘Siamo ancora tutti, nostro malgrado, dei bambini’ (2006: 3). This ties in with the New Italian Epic preoccupation with fatherhood and the need to grow up and, as Wu Ming 1 put it, become the parents of Italy. Nove feels that they have been held back from doing so due to the precariousness of work in Italy, where young adults never become fully adult, as they cannot make ends meet, which is shown by the personal stories related throughout the text. Later, he describes the writers associated with the pulp phenomenon as both critiquing modern culture and turning towards a future that would turn out to be different from how they had imagined it:

Il fenomeno letterario del “pulp” nacque [...] [di] un mondo ormai ridotto a slogan, pubblicità, tette ma anche violenza, gratuita e spettacolare. Con un linguaggio sempre più aggressivo e vacuo. Da quel linguaggio eravamo portati e veicolati verso un nuovo millennio.

Con l’idea che stesse iniziando una festa.

Una grande festa.

La festa non ci fu.

Malgrado Jovanotti.

La realtà superò il sarcasmo della letteratura che ne deformava i difetti e tutto cadde nel baratro dell'incertezza contornata da sfavillanti colori (Nove 2006: 42).

This again mirrors Wu Ming 1's narrative of a turn towards seriousness in the aftermath of the postmodern party, and also hints at the so-called 'ritorno alla realtà' that some critics have observed in twenty-first century literature.<sup>96</sup> Nove's subsequent description of the role of television today compounds this: 'privata della sua aura, la televisione sta rientrando nel suo ruolo di elettrodomestico. [...] Tutto quello che era manipolabile è stato manipolato. Ogni mostruosità mostrabile è stata creata (2006: 42-3). This statement appears too sweeping to be true, and Nove's views are as questionable as Wu Ming's and others' regarding a break with late twentieth century culture. Nove's assertion that 'Oggi, il brivido della televisione spenta, della serata tra amici [...] si sta riproponendo' (2006: 42) seems utopian. The enduring aura of television is shown by the fact that recent writing has continued to engage with problems related to the society of spectacle, as seen in Scurati's, Siti's and Genna's work, discussed above.

Indeed, the concerns of the Cannibals have certainly not been exhausted; rather, they have taken on different forms. Perhaps Italian pulp writing could be seen as part of the environment of what Wu Ming 1 labels 'Postmodernismi da quattro soldi' (2009a: 63) due to their refusal of ideas about political commitment and an insistence on seemingly gratuitous violence. However, the Cannibals were pioneers – like Tondelli before them – for co-opting the younger generation into literary production, for raising questions about a highly mediated society, and for opening out literature to all levels of experience in the modern world. Whilst television was the key preoccupation for the Cannibals, the New Italian Epic reflects twenty-

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<sup>96</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this, see chapter five. It is worth noting that Nove was one of the writers interviewed as part of *Allegoria*'s special issue on the 'ritorno alla realtà', when he stated: 'La mercificazione dell'esperienza umana esige la trasformazione in *fiction* della realtà. Non esiste altro che *fiction*, gli argini sono saltati da almeno un decennio' (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008: 19).

first century reality by incorporating the internet into their narratives, and using its possibilities to take literature beyond the confines of tradition. Could such a bold step into contaminated genres and using new technologies in literature have been made without the precursor of the deeply up-to-date and engaging, if not engaged, approach to narrative that the young writers of the nineties created? The way in which the *giovani cannibali* shook up the literary scene, as did the arrival of migrant writing, surely paved the way for Wu Ming and the other writers of the nebula.

## 2001

Amato sees the year 2001 as ‘il vero anno di nascita del New Italian Epic’ (2009). Three key events can be associated with this year, listed here in chronological order: Berlusconi’s coalition won a definitive electoral victory, the G8 summit in Genoa led to police violence against protestors, and, of course, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 took place in New York. Of these three, the second is given the most significance in terms of impact on this generation of Italian writers, both by Wu Ming and others. Amato states: ‘L’impressione suscitata dal G8 fu immediata, e, in Italia, più profonda e significativa degli attacchi terroristici dell’11 settembre. L’onda sismica scatenata a Genova coinvolse la coscienza di molti intellettuali, e si è propagata in latitudine fino ai giorni nostri’ (2009). Yet, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were characterised by similar elements to those we will see surrounding the violence a couple of months earlier in Genoa: a sense of *déjà-vu*, a highly mediated and fictional quality to the violence, and ambiguities surrounding what had happened. Perhaps we can see the insistence on the importance of the G8 in Genoa over the attacks on the Twin Towers as another instance of tending towards a national rather than an international narrative of periodisation. Although I will focus here on portrayals of the G8 in Genoa by

New Italian Epic writers, 2001 can be seen as a key year for bringing to the fore issues related to contemporary experience in Italy and across the western world.

Despite being held up as a defining generational moment and being directly discussed in the Memorandum (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 5 & 79), the G8 in Genoa in fact finds limited direct representation in the texts associated with the New Italian Epic.<sup>97</sup> This is in contrast to the glut of hard-hitting documentaries that have addressed what happened, such as Francesco Maselli's collective film *Un mondo diverso è possibile* (2001), Silvia Savorelli's *Sequenze sul G8* (2001), Francesca Comencini's *Carlo Giuliani: Ragazzo* (2002), or Daniele Vicari's *Diaz: Don't Clean Up This Blood* (2012),<sup>98</sup> as well as numerous responses in music and theatre (Melandri, Menegatto, Moroni and Zamperini 2011: 147), in literature from beyond the New Italian Epic nebula,<sup>99</sup> and in non-fiction books.<sup>100</sup> However, as we will see in the

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<sup>97</sup> However, the numerous historical novels that address failed revolutions, which I discuss in chapter four, could be seen as allegorically reflecting on Genoa, although they generally do not directly state this. This connection is openly made by Moresco in the screenplay he contributed to *Controinsurrezioni*, in the final section which splices together scenes of conflict from across history alongside his story about the Risorgimento; one of the images is described as follows: 'Inquadratura degli scontri, delle devastazioni e dei bestiali pestaggi di Genova e del sangue sui pavimenti' (Evangelisti and Moresco 2008: 118).

<sup>98</sup> Niwot states: 'So far, over thirty documentaries and one feature-length film dedicated to Genoa have emerged in an attempt to inform what will be remembered of these events. Some of these are the carefully crafted work of established auteurs, as is the case of Francesca Comencini's *Carlo Giuliani: Ragazzo* or Francesco Maselli's collective endeavor *Un mondo diverso è possibile*. Others could more accurately be defined as video testimonials: images captured through hand-held digital cameras by participants with limited professional training but with a great desire to serve as witnesses to history' (2011: 67).

<sup>99</sup> Melandri, Menegatto, Moroni and Zamperini point out that these are often *noir*-ish texts: 'Diversi scrittori italiani si sono cimentati nella stesura di romanzi *noir* che documentassero i fatti accaduti a Genova nel luglio del 2001, aderendo a un mandato di denuncia sociale diretto ad analizzare aspetti della vicenda ancora poco chiari' (2011: 148). Non-New Italian Epic novels involving the events at the G8 in Genoa include: *Gorilla Blues* (2003) by Sandrone Dazieri, *I segni sulla pelle* (2003) by Stefano Tassinari, *Istinto di sbirro* (2004) by Roberto Macciò, *I semi di Marizai* (2006) by Claudio Asciuti, *Una città in gabbia* (2006) by Annamaria Fassio, *Quando il comunismo finì a tavola* (2011) by Fernando Coratelli, and *Sia fatta la mia volontà (qui nel mondo)* by Domenico Esposito (2011). See also the graphic novel *Quella notte alla Diaz. Una cronaca del G8 a Genova* (2010) by Christian Mirra, based on his experiences of police violence at the Diaz high school.

<sup>100</sup> Simply entering 'G8 Genova' into the title search at the Biblioteca nazionale di Roma, eighteen results appear. These range from testimony from protestors, such as Lorenzo Guadagnucci's *Noi della Diaz: la notte dei manganelli al G8 di Genova: una democrazia umiliata: tutte le verità sui processi* (Milan: Terre di Mezzo, 2002), to revisionist accounts defending police and government actions, such as *Il G8 di Genova: mistificazione e realtà* (Milan: Bietti, 2002) by Fabrizio Cicchitto, not coincidentally a member of Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà party. Boscolo points to an almost obsessive turning over of what happened that, like accounts of events such as the Bologna station bombing, block closure: 'Un ottimo modo per non riprendersi dal trauma è investigarne ossessivamente i dettagli, mettendo in fila dati su dati senza che si giunga mai a una versione condivisa dalla popolazione e dalla magistratura' (2012b).



few texts that do confront Genoa directly, questions are raised about the unstable experience of the G8 protests that chime in with those raised by the documentaries about the same events and, at the same time, undermine the solidity of Wu Ming 1's (and others') portrayal of them as this generation's uniting collective experience. We will see what Rigney has described in terms of cultural memory, which employs many different forms and media, so that it 'seems more often than not the result of various cultural activities that feed into, repeat and reinforce each other' (2005: 20), rather than referring to experience in a direct, unmediated way.

What exactly happened in Genoa in 2001, and why have these events been seen as having had such an effect on this generation? Between 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> July 2001, a wide variety of different groups of protestors organised by the Genoa Social Forum had gathered in the northern Italian city to demonstrate against a range of issues related to globalisation, power and poverty on the occasion of the Group of Eight summit.<sup>101</sup> The event escalated into violence, partly because the police were reacting to reports that the anarchic Black Bloc were present to cause trouble. This violence culminated in the death of 23 year-old Carlo Giuliani, one of the protestors. It also led to human rights violations after the police stormed Diaz high school, where the Genoa Social Forum had their headquarters and where the police claimed to have found Molotov bombs, and at police stations, particularly in that of Bolzaneto.

Menegatto and Zamperini offer some statistics:

Nel bilancio di due giorni di scontri queste alcune statistiche: si contano 253 persone arrestate, 606 feriti, 6200 candelotti di lacrimogeni sparati dalle forze dell'ordine, 20 colpi di pistola, 50 miliardi di lire di danni e un morto. Altre fonti parlano di 482 feriti

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<sup>101</sup> McDonnell states that the Italian media viewed the no-global movement as radically left-wing, when in fact the groups planning to go to Genoa 'ranged from the largely Catholic Lilliput network to the moderate environmentalists of Legambiente' (2007: 76).

(di cui 355 manifestanti, 19 giornalisti e 108 poliziotti), 280 arresti (di cui 105 persone straniere), 2093 persone respinte alla frontiera (2011: 14).

Despite the protests and police reaction being extensively caught on camera in photos and videos, they also fell victim to misinformation, cover-ups and unsatisfactory outcomes from trials. Question marks remain, for example, over the cause of death of Giuliani and over the role played by the Black Bloc in what happened, as pointed out by Lucarelli in *G8: Cronaca di una battaglia* (2009: 63), in which he employs his familiar investigative style to attempt to unravel what exactly happened.

Lucarelli seems an appropriate reader of these events, given that, as McDonnell states of the Giuliani case, it has become one of the *misteri italiani* from which we have ‘only multiple subjective “truths” and hence no consensus on the facts’ (2007: 75). Thus, the events surrounding the G8 in Genoa can be seen as another instance of Foot’s divided memory (2010),<sup>102</sup> and were linked to other divided memories from Italian history. McDonnell has described the various ways in which ‘Giuliani has entered left iconography as the innocent victim of a corrupt, fascistic state’ (2007: 81), as shown, for example, by a Resistance veteran referring to Giuliani as a partisan on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2002 (2007: 81-2).<sup>103</sup> Giuliani’s death was also compared to, and often conflated with, that of Francesco Lorusso in Bologna in 1977 by various groups afterwards (Hajek 2013: 143-5). Indeed, Hajek has charted the way in which the memory of the events of 1977 in Bologna were taken up later by the No Global movement, as they were ‘in search of a political, collective identity’ (2013: 139). There were

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<sup>102</sup> This is also pointed out by Niwot (2011: 70) and Menegatto and Zamperini, who go on to ask: ‘Che cosa resta di Genova, oggi? Un senso diffuso di ingiustizia, una grande sofferenza umana, una forte sfiducia tra cittadini, forze dell’ordine e istituzioni. Sicuramente un’eredità pesante’ (2011: 1).

<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Niwot states: ‘Almost immediately, the events of Genoa were incorporated into this unresolved narrative of Italy’s fascist legacy’ (2011: 71). She explains that the atmosphere was particularly ripe for this parallel to be drawn, given that Berlusconi’s return to power earlier the same year had only been possible thanks to support from the Northern League and National Alliance (2011: 71).

also other parallels drawn with the *anni di piombo*: Lucarelli states: ‘erano anni che non si vedevano scontri come quelli di Genova, di tipo militare come quelli degli anni Settanta’ (2009: 57), and Nando Dalla Chiesa saw the event as this generation’s Piazza Fontana (2011: xii-xiii). As Boscolo argues: ‘il G8 di Genova rappresenta l’ultimo di una lunga teoria di traumi da cui gli italiani sembrano non riprendersi più’ (2012b).

These dynamics can also be seen at work in the way in which Wu Ming have related to the events of 2001. They were intimately linked to what happened in Genoa, as they had encouraged many to attend the protests, releasing a call to arms in the lead-up entitled: ‘*Dalle moltitudini d'Europa in marcia contro l'impero e verso Genova*’.<sup>104</sup> At the time, their novel *Q*, written as Luther Blissett, was growing in popularity, and they were travelling around promoting and discussing it. They later noted that the subsequent bloody events meant that their portrayals of protestant uprisings in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe became connected in their minds to the G8 protests: ‘cominciammo, confusamente, a pensare una nuova metafora [...] *Genova come Frankenhause*n’.<sup>105</sup> Significantly, *Q*’s portrayal of a betrayed revolution has also been read as an allegory for the *Movimento del '77* (Genna 2007a). To multiply the echoes, or multidirectional memories (Rothberg 2009), between the seventies and the new millennium, it is worth noting that Wu Ming have also written a screenplay with Guido Chiesa for his 2004 film *Lavorare con lentezza*, set between 1976 and 1977 and portraying the protest movement, Radio Alice and the death of Lorusso in a story arc that shows the characters moving from playful irreverence to violence and a disillusionment that is mirrored

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<sup>104</sup> They had also written a short story, ‘Bologna Social Enclave’, just before Genoa at the end of May 2001. It portrays a meeting of a political group that is planning various protests, a facsimile of the Genoa Social Forum. The presentation of this meeting in the short story is parodic, affectionately poking fun at the group’s quibbling over details and its inability to get things done. In a later *postilla*, the collective explain that it was inspired by Wu Ming 1 and Wu Ming 4 attending just such a meeting in the run-up to Genoa, and they reflect on the tragic patina the story gains in hindsight: ‘Il nostro racconto aveva capito qualcosa che a noi ancora sfuggiva. Nelle settimane prima di Genova, la nostra *vis comica* cercava di avvertirci: lo spirito, l’attitudine con cui si andava a quell’appuntamento erano tragicamente inadeguati, sbagliati. Rimanemmo sordi a quegli avvisi, e insieme a tanti altri sottovalutammo ogni cattivo segnale. Fu così che cademmo in trappola’ (Wu Ming 2011: 413).

<sup>105</sup> See [http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap6\\_IXa.htm](http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap6_IXa.htm) (accessed 07.08.15).

by the grey hues of the film's palette in the latter scenes.<sup>106</sup> The events depicted in the film happened when Wu Ming were children and are undoubtedly a key reference point that conditioned their formation as politically engaged writers, which may go some way towards explaining their reaction to the violence at the G8 protests.

Moreover, the sense of ownership that Hajek describes in terms of the former participants in social movements like the *Movimento del '77* (2013: 10) can be strongly detected in Wu Ming 1's words about Genoa in the Memorandum, where it appears on the first page, linked to recollections of Wu Ming working on their novel 54:

In quei giorni curavamo ancora le ferite di Genova, 20 e 21 luglio. Ferite soltanto metaforiche, per grazia del cielo, ma a centinaia di persone era toccata peggior sorte: teste avvolte nelle bende, braccia steccate, piedi ingessati, cateteri. E un ragazzo era morto. Genova. Solo chi è stato in quelle strade può capire (2009a: 5).

The last sentence is striking in its insistence on the importance of being present at this defining moment. It seems as if he wants to create an élite group of participants in this generation's version of resistance against the authorities. Despite this sense of ownership resurfacing in the texts of the nebula that address the G8 in Genoa, they can only offer fragmented and, at times, highly mediated portrayals of the experience, which seemingly undermine the importance of participation in this event. This is also tied up with the nature of the protests – not only were there a wide range of heterogeneous protest groups present in Genoa, but it is also difficult to straightforwardly represent events about which there is yet to

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<sup>106</sup> Can it be a coincidence that the security guard who cycles past every evening as Squalo and Pelo, two characters who are digging a tunnel, wait to climb underground, is always whistling Verdi's 'Va pensiero' from *Nabucco*, which has been closely associated with Italy's struggle for freedom during the Risorgimento? In the same vein, Chiesa also made a film of *Il partigiano Johnny* (2000), Fenoglio's seminal novel about the Resistance, which Wu Ming reference in 54 by intertextually borrowing the character Ettore. The echoes and remediation that I discuss in chapter four in relation to the *topos* of the failed revolution seem to be present around *Lavorare con lentezza* too.

be complete ‘closure’ or justice done – and of 21<sup>st</sup> century convergence culture, as we will see.

The first example of a text about Genoa from the nebula that I will examine is *Roma k.o.* (2008), written by Marco Philopat with Duka. The text centres round an imagined fire at the Corviale building in Rome, after which the building’s inhabitants are moved to a tent city at Cinecittà, where they revolt and trash the nearby shopping centre Cinecittà2. Interwoven into the account of the ensuing five days of protest are the recollections of Duka – who is both a co-author and a protagonist – about his life as a cultural agitator, punk and member of the underground movement.<sup>107</sup> He offers a sort of potted alternative history of the protest movements since the seventies, taking in the *Movimento del ’77* and Pantera,<sup>108</sup> as well as Genoa, which, again, creates links between 2001 and previous struggles against the authorities. Gerardo, a journalist covering the protest, records these recollections, which are relayed in the text verbatim, with a strongly oral quality indicated both by the language used and the hyphenated fragments of sentences to indicate snatches of speech.<sup>109</sup> These speeches appear among the more straightforward account of what happens in the five days after the imagined Corviale fire. Duka’s narration of the G8 protests is constantly deferred in the narrative, as he repeatedly says he will discuss them later, but either becomes side-tracked or interrupted by real-time events, almost seeming like a Penelope character weaving stories to delay his avid listeners.

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<sup>107</sup> Philopat has also been a protestor and part of the Milanese underground. He has written about his experiences in a trilogy, which includes the volumes *I viaggi di Mel* (2004) and *La banda Bellini* (2002), both of which are mentioned in the Memorandum (Wu Ming 2009: 12 & 14 respectively).

<sup>108</sup> Pantera was a student protest movement that opposed reforms to Italian universities. It started with the occupation of the University of Palermo in 1989 and spread to other universities in the peninsula until spring 1990. It can be seen as another important example of political protest that could have inspired the New Italian Epic writers.

<sup>109</sup> The text is certainly an unidentified narrative object, mixing fact, fiction and autobiographical elements. It also begins with a meta-textual discussion between Gerardo and his friend Morgana about how they will put the text together, then a newspaper report, before launching into the main narrative.

When it finally arrives, the story of Duka's experience in Genoa only occupies three pages, and is a confused series of recollections rather than a coherent story, relying on the almost stock images that came out of the footage of the protests – running, confusion and the death of Giuliani – that we will see repeated throughout the texts analysed here. Take for example the following passage:

A Genova mi è successo di tutto – al G8 la mia vita e quella di ogni persona presente è completamente cambiata... A Genova mi sono divertito – a Genova ho conosciuto molta gente – alcune delle persone conosciute a Genova sono diventate per me importantissime – a Genova ho pianto – ho corso molto – ho salvato delle persone – ho infilato in bocca guaranà ginseng creatina e sali minerali a gente disidratata – a Genova c'avevo i tasconi dei miei pantaloncini corti da surfista pieni di medicine [...] Vabbè a Genova ho subito la guerra – ho avuto la sensazione di stare in guerra (2008: 205-6).

It is clearly shown to be a defining, watershed moment in the lives of those involved, and the importance of having been present is later underlined again by Duka when he cannot quite remember the specific details of his experience, but says: 'non me ne frega un cazzo – perché io c'ero' (207); this strongly echoes Wu Ming 1's insistence on the importance of being there.

In *Il maestro di nodi* (2002) by Carlotto,<sup>110</sup> we similarly see a character known as 'Max la Memoria' deeply affected and, indeed, changed by his participation at the G8 protests, repeating the common trope associated with the G8 in Genoa and encapsulated in

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<sup>110</sup> Carlotto's *oeuvre*, although dominated by *gialli*, also makes incursions into historical novels (*Cristiani di Allah*) and autobiography (*Il fuggiasco*). In the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 places him alongside Camilleri and Lucarelli, saying: 'hanno lavorato sul poliziesco in modo tutto sommato "tradizionale", per poi sorprendere con romanzi storici "mutanti"' (2009a: 11). Whilst *Il maestro di nodi* is one of his more traditional thrillers, its interaction with real-life events, political underpinnings and possible autobiographical elements (the Alligatore's time in prison could be drawing on Carlotto's own memories) mean that it could be placed at least on the outer edges of the nebula.

the title of Maselli's film *Un mondo diverso è possibile*. However, the narrative, focalised through the main character of Max's fellow private detective known as the Alligatore, stays behind, only watching the events on television. This mediated experience hinges on those familiar images too:

Scene di scontri. Un corpo a terra vicino a un fuoristrada dei carabinieri. Canottiera bianca, jeans, passamontagna blu intriso di sangue. Un poliziotto accorse di essere inquadrato dalla telecamera e iniziò a urlare all'indirizzo di un altro giovane mascherato che stava fuggendo. 'Sei stato tu ad ammazzarlo con la tua pietra, pezzo di merda (2002: 100-101).

Anyone acquainted with the footage recognises this depiction of the dead body of Giuliani. The fragmented quality of the narrative both mimics the immediacy of the camera's filming and demonstrates a lack of ability to process what is being seen by resisting a more fluid and complete description. As with the television footage of 9/11, the narrator notes the unreal, fictional quality of what is being shown, with the police resembling 'i cattivi di qualche vecchio film di fantascienza' (101). The Alligatore immediately suspects that all is not quite what it seems; he thinks: 'In realtà non poteva trattarsi che di un piano preordinato' (101). Once the circumstances of Giuliani's death become clear, the narrative focuses on his young body, which became a media icon (Hajek 2013: 76): 'Era piccolo e minuto. Aveva le braccia così sottili che era riuscito a infilarsi fin sopra il gomito un rotolo di nastro adesivo che aveva trovato per terra' (101). The ensuing events in Genoa – the detainment of protestors by the police, the storming of Diaz high school – are also mediated through the television news: 'Le telecamere inquadrarono teste rotte e nasi spaccati' (105). The Alligatore later realises that, despite the witnesses' testimony beginning to circulate – including Max's which he briefly relates to them when he returns, a story of being attacked and escaping in fear of the police –

justice will not be done: ‘Nessuno avrebbe pagato’ (118). Yet, although Carlotto’s narrative clearly calls the official version into question, it cannot offer up a more definitive version, nor can any of the New Italian Epic texts. Justice has not been done regarding Genoa, and, in any case, the fragmented nature of personal recollections and of the recorded footage means that the experience resists being moulded into a satisfactory, complete event or narrative.

Whilst this is the last mention of what happened at the G8 in Carlotto’s text, it is somehow tied up with the mystery they are solving, which relates to a seedy underworld of sadomasochism, bringing up memories of the Alligatore’s time in prison and his violent treatment there. The repressed trauma of the Alligatore’s past that the investigation brings to the surface echoes the way in which the G8 summit has been processed, another instance of police brutality that goes unpunished and is thus repressed, but its repercussions are felt. The search for truth and justice in terms of the *maestro di nodi* that they are hunting for comes from outside the state and the police force, from the three private investigators who operate beyond the law. There is a sense that these different instances of institutional and criminal violence are all inter-linked, tied up together like the knots of the title, giving an impression of the darkness and violence both above and below the surface of Italian life today. As in other works by Carlotto, there is a deep sense of *impegno* at the root of this detective story; even if it is never explicitly articulated, it contains indirect comment on twenty-first century Italy.

De Michele’s approach is also telling of a difficulty in directly confronting the events in Genoa through narration or offering a definitive version.<sup>111</sup> It is left as a gap between two

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<sup>111</sup> De Michele can be seen as a key figure in the New Italian Epic, as he is on the editorial board of *Carmilla*, the online journal that has dealt extensively with the debate surrounding the Memorandum. *Tre uomini paradossali* was recommended for publication by *i Quindici*, a group of readers created as a result of Wu Ming’s comment that they had too many manuscripts being sent to them to read, who work almost as literary agents outside of the publishing industry (see Di Porto 2004). De Michele’s trilogy is available for free download on the website of *i Quindici*: <http://www.iquindici.org/>.



books in his trilogy: *Tre uomini paradossali* (2004) is set, not coincidentally, in 1993, *Scirocco* (2005) in 1998, then *La visione del cieco* (2008) picks up the story of the same protagonists – Andrea, Lara and Cristiano – in 2004, when Andrea, whose asthma was exacerbated by the teargas used at the G8 protests, goes to stay in a village in the mountains in order to breathe cleaner air. In *Scirocco*, there had already been a strong sense of foreboding, symbolised by the ill wind of the title, which seemed to foreshadow what was to come: ‘Se non lo senti col naso lo senti nella schiena, quando te la spezza ed è troppo tardi’ (De Michele 2005: 320).<sup>112</sup> Moreover, there is direct use of documentation in the text of testimony from someone who was at the attack on Diaz high school (291-2), but here it is displaced and used to describe a fictional incident in a nightclub, as the author points out in the notes at the end (593-4). Although he does not explain why he made this choice, there is a strong sense of what he will address, just as Duka dramatically defers his narration in *Roma k.o.*

Despite being set after the G8 of 2001 had already taken place, *La visione del cieco* attempts to address the protests and their aftermath. The main focus of the text is a murder mystery in the small town, which Andrea is dragged into solving, although the impact of Genoa is very much felt in the narrative. We discover that Andrea is not the only character with medical problems because of the protests: their friend Ferodo also has lasting damage. He was not present at the protests but gathered photos and films related to Giuliani’s death and analysed them on his computer, but then was badly beaten up by the police for sharing them with others, leaving him with lasting damage to his physical and mental health. The violence has taken its toll both physically and mentally for Andrea too, who has vivid flashbacks to what happened. In the first flashback in the text, he relives losing his friends in

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<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the same metaphor is used again in *La visione del cieco*: ‘Però i venti non li puoi controllare: non puoi dire al maestrale dove andare, non puoi invertire il libeccio verso l’Africa, far uscire la bora dall’imbuto dell’Adriatico, ingentilire lo scirocco’ (257).

the confusion and seeing a photographer documenting what was happening. Then in a later flashback, he remembers being tear-gassed, in a particularly chaotic memory in which the lack of punctuation creates a sense of breathless anxiety:

*correvamo in confusione inciampando cadendo rialzando ci riprendevamo a correre  
ci infilavamo nei portoni per rifiatare bussavamo alle porte qualche porta si apriva  
qualcuno trovava riparo qualche porta restava chiusa il corridoio diventava una  
trappola per topi* (102-3).

As in *Il maestro di nodi* and *Roma k.o.*, we see those recurring images once again. These flashbacks appear in italics, which seems to illustrate on a textual level that they cannot be fully incorporated into the narrative, or worked through by Andrea / De Michele.<sup>113</sup> Andrea continues to examine photographs of Genoa, fragments that he assembles, which he likens to the glass that was broken at the town nurse Olga's flat, then put back together; however, he realises the significance of that comparison: 'Non torna intero: restano i solchi tra vetro e

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<sup>113</sup> Significantly, italics are also used in Andrea Camilleri's *Il giro di boa* (2003a) for the section in which Montalbano reflects on the G8 in Genoa at the beginning of the text. The Inspector, like Carlotto's Alligatore, has a sense that there is more to these events than meets the eye, as he tells his colleague Mimi: "*nelle sale operative genovesi in quei giorni c'era gente che non ci doveva stare. Ministri, deputati e tutti dello stesso partito. Quel partito che si è sempre appellato all'ordine e alla legalità. Ma bada bene, Mimi: il loro ordine, la loro legalità*" (Camilleri 2003a: 16). The italicised section abruptly ends after a discussion in which Mimi tries to persuade Montalbano not to quit his job, then, at the end of the chapter, Montalbano is distracted from these thoughts by the discovery of a body at the beach. The plot centres round unravelling this mystery whilst engaging with issues related to immigration and people trafficking. Camilleri explains in the 'Nota' at the end of the text that the plot was inspired by true stories from the newspapers, which are acknowledged as sources (269). Yet this shift to different political subject matter can be seen as a sort of deferral, particularly as it brings up issues that are not dissimilar to those brought up by the protests in Genoa. For example, Montalbano thinks about the ways in which the general public engage with events in the news, referring to the horrible fate of many migrants coming to Italy but in a way that could also describe the way in which Genoa was processed through the television screen: 'Uno le taliava, diceva "povirazzi" e continuava a mangiarsi gli spaghetti con le vongole' (65). The title of the book clearly has various associations. The 'boa' could be referring to the sea, in which Montalbano swims, in which he discovers the body, and in which desperate migrants drown. Yet 'un giro di boa' also means a turning point, which the G8 in Genoa was for many Italians and is for Montalbano, and this is precisely the phrase Wu Ming 1 used to describe 2001 in the quote at the beginning of this chapter (Wu Ming 1 2010). Whilst the Montalbano books cannot be seen as New Italian Epic, Camilleri is one of the authors in the nebula due to his historical novels (discussed in chapter four). Yet, *Il giro di boa* provides an interesting comparison to *Scirroco* and *Il maestro di nodi*: in an operation that is not dissimilar to that of Carlotto and De Michele, Camilleri brings together two issues – immigration and Genoa – that are distinct but cut from the same narrative cloth, and thus shed light on one another.

vetro. Quelle linee non le puoi eliminare. Non puoi ricomporre il bicchiere, non lo puoi inverare. Non più di quanto tu possa riportare al ramo il fiore caduto' (38). These cracks disrupting a sense of wholeness and coherence are everywhere present in this narrative too. This implies that, whilst in a convergent world information and perspectives are multiplied, this simply generates the need for more interpretative work, rather than furnishing a composite, whole truth.

As in Carlotto's text, the G8 in Genoa also finds allegorical reflection in the text's murder mystery. The narrative events are initiated by the brutal murder of a baby, which uncovers the many skeletons in the closet of this seemingly sleepy, nameless mountain town: a river polluted by a shady rubbish processing plant, African migrant workers killed in a hate crime, drug use sanctioned by the pharmacy's under-the-counter prescriptions, extra-marital affairs, incest.<sup>114</sup> Parallels with the G8 are suggested by the death of an innocent bringing to light another version of what had really been going on. The narrator states there are three elements at play in these murders: 'quello che vedono, quello che capiscono, quello che non vedono' (277). This was precisely what was at stake in Genoa, as the reconstruction that the three main protagonists create using garden gnomes to explain the G8 protests to Olga demonstrates. Cristiano remembers: 'Tu credi di aver visto e sentito, e invece quello che capisce come va davvero rimane l'unico che non vede e non sente perché non sta lì: Ferodo, che raccoglie le foto e i filmati' (246). Olga, like much of the Italian public and like Carlotto's Alligatore, was not present, and only had the events mediated through television; Lara states: 'Olga non lo sa di Genova [...] ha visto solo la foto dell'estintore e della pistola

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<sup>114</sup> The story is reminiscent of David Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks*, as it portrays small town life with dark secrets bubbling under the surface that a detective coming from outside tries to unravel, and in doing so finds himself tied in knots. There is also a fairy-tale or morality tale quality to *La visione del cieco*, which encourages an allegorical reading of the text. Each character is known by his or her job - pharmacist, nurse, doctor, lawyer, mayor - seeming to represent types, and, when the baby is massacred, they suspect a wolf came down from the mountains.

in televisione. /Come tutti, o quasi' (240). However, this view seems to be almost as limited as those who participated. It is significant that the narrative uses Pasolini's death as an analogy for the town's murder mystery (196).<sup>115</sup> In an essay about Pasolini's death, Gordon has described the way in which Pino Pelosi always maintained that he alone had killed him, then in 2005 changed his story saying there were two other men involved and he in fact tried to protect Pasolini, but no subsequent definitive version has emerged: 'the man who was present at the scene in November 1975 offers as much and as little clarity and understanding as the imaginary web of event-narratives woven around Pasolini's death' (2007: 163). This seems as true for the other Italian mystery that is the G8 in Genoa and its imaginary web of event-narratives.

Boscolo underlines the significance of choosing to re-enact what happened for Olga using the gnomes as props, gnomes who are the seven dwarves:

Here the dwarfs, as symbols of a lesser degree of credibility, reduce the status of the allegorized object, alluding to the fact that the whole case became a farce and was eventually closed, whereas the culprits should have been punished at the time. The dwarf chosen to represent the victim is Dopey, whose extreme gentleness serves to emphasise the brutality with which life was taken away from Giuliani at a very young age (2010b: 28).

The dwarves then become a wider allegory in the text, as Cristiano goes on to talk about them representing an idea of safety that must be protected from some kind of insidious outside influence in front gardens of villas across the north of Italy, 'da Venezia a Milano, da Milano a Torino' (248). Whilst 'i senegalesi, i marocchini, i rumeni' are kept out of these villas,

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<sup>115</sup> De Michele also refers to Pasolini's death in *Tre uomini paradossali* (2004: 122); he is another writer who cannot *dimenticare* Pasolini, to use Antonello's term (2012).

inside them are 'il rottweiler, il fuoristrada e i nani di giardino. Per tutto questo hanno ammazzato un ragazzo in strada' (248). This suggests an explanation both for Giuliani's murder and for the murder in this town, which in turn represents a microcosm for (at least the north of) Italy. The death of an innocent is explained by the need to protect something, to maintain the status quo. Giuliani becomes a sacrifice to an idea of order and safety from any outside threat to stability that is repeated again in this town's murder mystery, but the threat is actually coming from the inside, from within the walls of the villa, within the town, or from the state itself.

Andrea is enlisted by the local police inspector, Furlan, to help him try to solve the mystery of the murdered baby, and, subsequently, the murdered priest. Andrea's role – and that of the readers too – is to try to interpret what happened by reading between the lines. Furlan tells him: 'tu aiutami a capire cosa si nasconde dietro le lettere e le scritte' (147); later, Andrea realises it was Olga who wrote the word 'Assassini' in red on the church walls, telling her how he realised this: 'Mettendo insieme le cose che non mi hai detto' (190). As with many other New Italian Epic texts, *La visione del cieco* is staged around an investigation, which in turn encourages the reader to 'read the world' (Amici 2010a: 10) and past events. The power of words is a constant theme in De Michele's *giallo*; the writing on the wall, alongside the anonymous letters sent to various townspeople, help bring the various mysteries to light. Yet, words and the truth are also chewed up by the media machine, particularly in the reconstructions and discussions on the chat show presented by the local television journalist, Gianmaria Vescovi. Twice we are told: 'La realtà prosegue nella sua rappresentazione. La rappresentazione determina la realtà. /Realtà e rappresentazione mescolano le loro acque: naturalmente, dopo la pausa pubblicitaria' (127, 232); both times, this statement cannot but seem to resonate with the experience of the G8 protests. Yet, the truth, or the true interpretation of events, remains out of reach here too. Andrea, Cristiano and

Lara struggle to unravel what happened, as does Furlan: ‘Qualcosa sfugge alla logica, qualcosa non sta andando per il verso giusto’ (90). Everyone seems to be guilty of something, but also puppets in a wider hidden agenda linked to business interests. At the end, our three friends and Olga must escape into the woods, running away from shadowy, unidentified men: ‘Gli uomini senza volto’ (280). As with Genoa, there is no sense of loose ends being tied up, or justice being done; the cracks remain in the glass as the text draws to a close.

These cracks are inscribed into the very style of the narrative. *La visione del cieco* is particularly interesting in terms of Wu Ming 1’s ‘sovversione “nascosta” di linguaggio e stile’ (2009a: 37). Apart from more obvious stylistic waywardness – the various fragments jumping around in time, including sections subtitled ‘REWIND’ (222, 267, 268, 270), focalising parts of the narrative through the eyes of the cat Merlino, eschewing punctuation at times,<sup>116</sup> and incorporating oral language<sup>117</sup> - De Michele wrote the book without using the verb ‘essere’ except in one fragment, when Andrea describes his confusion over piecing together the various bits of the mystery: ‘Come una frase senza verbo essere [...] Le parole rimbalzano qua e là come palle di gomma cercando un senso a cui aggraparsi’ (239). This gives the narrative an unusual feel, and perhaps the reader may not immediately identify the cause, as De Michele never states it in the text. However, he does hint at his reasons in Cristiano’s reply to Andrea: ‘Mai piaciuto quel verbo lì [...] immobilizza la vita, fissa il movimento come un ago dentro l’insetto pronto per la teca. Una vita sottovetro... [...] Il verbo essere inaridisce il deserto, parole profughe, il senso fugge verso la vita...’ (239-40). This is reminiscent of the poststructuralist insistence on the gap between reality and language,

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<sup>116</sup> Towards the end, when the protagonists are escaping through the wood, the narrative seems to break down into almost poetry that is unpunctuated, including the final words that close the chapter: ‘L’alba s’aggiorna roseggiando ditate nel cielo / Proiettili scintillano i rami arroventandoli / Fiammelle sgorganti tra bagliori di luce foglie ombreggianti cespugli inciampani nonvisti / Il giorno tenebra’ (283). Their fate is left hanging in the balance by the lack of a full stop, alongside the darkness and light both present in the final image.

<sup>117</sup> See for example Furlan’s oral tic of saying ‘vogliodire’ (first appears on page 23 then reappears throughout) or Olga’s very colloquial language.

signified and signifier; something is always lost when we inscribe experience into language, and, as we have seen with both the fictional murder mystery and Genoa, language can manipulate the truth. Cristiano goes on to make this connection:

Come Genova, hai presente? Tanti frammenti, ma al centro non il verbo VIVERE, ma il verbo MORTE: che non dà senso. E allora lo crei: connessione di suoni, immagini, foto, parole. Non davanti agli occhi ma nella memoria: si forma lì.

[...] Connettere i frammenti, ogni frammento una parola, ogni gioco di parole un senso.

I vivi e i morti. Uomini e animali. La vita scorre come il sangue che lacera la ferita, il verbo essere benda le parole per bloccare il sangue (240).

Cristiano's words are strikingly similar to William S. Burroughs' comments on the verb 'to be':

You are an animal. You are a body. Now whatever you may be you are not an 'animal', you are not a 'body', because these are verbal labels. The IS of identity always carries the implication of that and nothing else, and it also carries the assignment of permanent condition. [...] I cannot be and am not the verbal label 'myself'. The word BE in English contains, as a virus contains, its precoded message of damage, the categorical imperative of permanent condition. To be a body, to be nothing else, to stay a body. To be an animal, to be nothing else, to stay an animal (quoted in Odier 2008: 200-1).

Although it is unclear whether De Michele made this connection deliberately, it is a plausible comparison given the importance of Burroughs as a literary model for the New Italian Epic

writers, as discussed in the previous chapter. There is a similar sense in the words of both writers of the violence of language, which controls nature and reality, and arbitrarily encodes experience in a way that takes the life out of it. Through his refusal to use the verb ‘essere’ in *La visione del cieco*, De Michele seems to be trying to restore life and truth to what he relates, and find a new form to access reality after the violence that was wrought on language and on the body by the experience of the G8 protests of 2001.

Yet, unreliable memory rather than reality is what the narrative hinges on. This is shown by the way it begins and ends with the photograph of Andrea and Cristiano in their youth, a photo capturing a moment in time: ‘*Il bello delle foto: il mondo resterà sempre ai nostri piedi*’ (289). We know from the previous books in the trilogy that the third person in the photo is Barbara, who died, and that the photo comes from their time as left-wing activists in the seventies, thus once again linking the recent protests with a previous idea of political protest that similarly became subsequently disillusioned, a link that is further underlined by the use of italics here as in Andrea’s flashbacks to Genoa. Ideas about memory are also suggested in the text’s title, which comes from a quotation from Plutarch rendered in the epigraph:

Nulla di tutto ciò che accade – azioni, discorsi, affetti – è o dura, ma nell’istante stesso in cui è, non è più, perché il tempo travolge ogni cosa come un fiume in piena. Ma questa facoltà dell’anima che è la memoria, impadronendosi non so come di quanto non è più, ne crea un’immagine e una realtà. Per questo l’oracolo ai Tessali su Arne ammoniva di fare attenzione all’udito di un sordo e alla visione di un cieco.

This quotation portrays memory as an image that is not reality, given that every real event or experience is fleeting and immaterial; memory creates its own reality and is linked to an idea of absence. The experience of the G8 in Genoa in the story is similarly an absence; we must



look for a vision we cannot see. The text can only offer us ‘un’immagine e una realtà’, just like the other New Italian Epic texts that deal with Genoa. Instead of directly being about the protests, it provokes reflection around what happened, how it was experienced and how it has been communicated and digested.

The few New Italian Epic texts that do directly confront what has been framed as a key generational moment repeatedly demonstrate the impossibility of wholeness, or of an absolute truth, in contrast to the strong sense of ownership and collective memory that Wu Ming 1 transmits in the Memorandum. The approach of these texts in many ways resembles what Niwot (2011) has described in the documentary films concerning the G8 of 2001, many of which are consciously partial stories rather than the whole story, and they often draw links with previous experiences. Niwot states:

In the case of Genoa, we must speak not of history, but of histories; of micro-stories within macro-histories and of individual and collective memories. *Un mondo diverso è possibile, Sequenze sul G8* and the other Genoa documentaries do not fashion themselves as final words on the subject of Genoa, but share instead a common goal of challenging the version of events depicted by mass media, which ultimately showed much but revealed little. The many documentaries, video testimonials and cinematic essays that have emerged since the July 2001 G8 protests speak to the extent to which the power to recount and reclaim historical memory has become an increasingly equal-access opportunity in the digital age (2011: 86).

Whilst the novels of the nebula are very different texts from the documentaries, they tend towards ‘micro-stories within macro-histories’, as is typical to the New Italian Epic phenomenon, and communicate a similar message about the nature of historical memory in today’s world. Perhaps there can no longer be clear-cut generational moments as Wu Ming 1

might desire in such an equal-access environment and, moreover, perhaps leaving such generational myths behind is beneficial, instead of labouring under the weight of parental memories as previous generations have had to negotiate myths such as the Italian Resistance or the protest decades of the sixties and seventies, as we will see in the following chapter. Embracing the cracks in the glass as De Michele's text does means embracing possibilities and innovative approaches to negotiating memories and experience through narrative.

## **2008+**

As mentioned in the quotation that opened this chapter, 2008 saw another electoral victory for Berlusconi, but was also the beginning of the end of his influence over Italy, which has been connected to the concerns surrounding the New Italian Epic. His star began to wane particularly after the 2013 elections and the later advent of the ostensibly centre-left Matteo Renzi. Given these changes in the political landscape, can we see the New Italian Epic as now having ended? In what ways have the concerns of these writers endured in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

Wu Ming 1 said two years after the Memorandum first appeared: 'Il NIE è già diventato qualcos'altro. La nebulosa ha cambiato densità e profilo. Siamo oltre' (2010a). Later, in a 2014 interview, he went as far as saying that the New Italian Epic no longer existed:

Dubito fortemente che si possa parlare del NIE coniugando i verbi al presente, a meno che non sia presente storico. Se dovessi fotografare la scena letteraria italiana oggi, sei anni dopo il memorandum, ne risulterebbe un'immagine molto diversa. Già allora la mia era una 'istantanea del passato', del periodo 1993 - 2008. Fotografavo una scena

che si stava già allontanando nel tempo. Oggi la ‘vena’ di molti autori i cui libri NIE avevo incluso nel memorandum si è inaridita (alcuni sono addirittura morti!), e pochi hanno lavorato per prolungare in avanti le linee di tendenza che cercavo di individuare. La lunga crisi ha accelerato il tracollo dell'editoria, un tracollo non solo economico ma culturale e di idee, e mi sembra che in Italia stia uscendo poco di davvero interessante. O almeno, esce poco che interessi a me. Delle ‘tendenze’ individuate nel 2008, l'unica che procede a grande velocità è quella degli ‘oggetti narrativi non-identificati’, ma non è certo una prerogativa italiana, l'ibridazione delle tipologie testuali è una cosa che sta avvenendo in tutto il mondo. Questo è il motivo per cui non posso parlare ‘a nome del NIE’ [...] in Italia non c'è più nessun NIE (Brioni 2014: 287).

Certainly, the Memorandum, as we have seen, was a limited approach to the phenomenon, and the use of unidentified objects, as I will try to demonstrate throughout this thesis, is an increasingly widespread and transnational phenomenon, yet I would disagree that the lines of inquiry of the New Italian Epic have dried up.

Similar books are still being published that develop the concerns that the nebula explores. Aside from subsequent work post-2008 by the New Italian Epic writers that have continued to investigate these concerns, there have been various texts published since that undeniably display a family resemblance by writers that for whatever reason were excluded from the Memorandum, despite already being active on the literary scene in 2008 and examining similar issues, such as Nicola Lagioia, Christian Raimo and Giorgio Vasta. There have also been texts from various writers that have subsequently moved towards ideas that are integral to the New Italian Epic, for example: Scrittura industriale collettiva's 2012 novel about the Second World War, *In territorio nemico*, written by 113 writers (discussed in

chapter four); Francesco Piccolo's Strega Prize-winning *Il desiderio di essere come tutti* (2013), in which he looked precisely at issues related to the fall of the First Republic, the rise of Berlusconi and *impegno* through an autofictional lens; or Giorgio Falco's *La gemella H* (2014), a historical novel about Nazi Germany that could be placed in relation to Genna's *Hitler* and Helena Janeczek's work for a fascinating analysis of the workings of memory regarding the Second World War in the twenty-first century.

Moreover, since 2008, other comparable literary movements have developed, which also suggests that the cultural scene has not yet moved beyond the concerns the Memorandum raised. An important parallel can be seen in the phenomenon of *narrazioni della precarietà*, which includes books, anthologies of short stories and blogs that reflect on the precariousness of today's world, and particularly of the working world, as seen in Nove's *Mi chiamo Roberta...*, discussed above. Like the New Italian Epic texts, these narratives have employed transmediality, with their writers often working across platforms, for example Nove's book was later made into a theatre production (Nove 2011), and Michela Murgia's *Il mondo deve sapere. Romanzo tragicomico di una telefonista precaria* (2006) was an autobiographical blog, then a novel, a theatre production and a film. Some of the New Italian Epic writers, such as Vanni Santoni and Andrea Bajani, have written *narrazioni della precarietà*,<sup>118</sup> and such narrations have also been likened to Wu Ming 1's 'unidentified narrative objects' in their mix of fictional and non-fictional modes (Contarini 2010: 11). Their use of testimony and real-world experience also means they have been seen in terms of the so-called 'ritorno alla realtà', although, as with the New Italian Epic, this is a weak connection. Jansen rightly points out that these are more late-postmodern than mimetic, realist texts (2014: 80), which is similar to my argument in chapter five about the supposedly

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<sup>118</sup> See Santoni's *Personaggi precari* (2007) and Bajani's *Mi spezzo ma non m'impiego. Guida di viaggio per lavoratori flessibili* (2006).

‘realist’ texts in the nebula. Despite these similarities and crossovers, many of the *scrittori precari* do not choose as their form of expression epic, long-form books, in contrast to the New Italian Epic. Jansen states: ‘[il] racconto breve sembra essere una delle forme privilegiate per narrare esperienze di lavoro frammentarie, a tempo determinato, con una sostanza “liquida” adatta a trasformarsi nella transmedialità della rete’ (2014: 74). Nevertheless, they have similar ingredients to the texts of the nebula.

Another related phenomenon that positioned itself in opposition to the dominant culture with a strong sense of *impegno* was the TQ generation, made up of writers, as well as people from other professions, whose manifesto in 2011 protested against the way in which the generation of Italians in their thirties and forties – *trentenni e quarantenni* – had been excluded from the country’s ‘vita politica e produttiva’.<sup>119</sup> Cortellessa pointed out that their originality lay in their determination to work against the individualism that characterised the Berlusconi era and ‘elaborare nuove pratiche comuni fondate – se possibile – su una concettualizzazione che si traduca in un’assunzione di responsabilità collettiva, comune. Dunque politica’ (2011b). This is also what Wu Ming and others attempted with the New Italian Epic. Although the TQ generation’s blog closed in 2013,<sup>120</sup> and it is difficult to gauge how much they actually achieved, it is clear that the points raised by Wu Ming’s Memorandum and other New Italian Epic writers are still very much relevant to others today.

To bring together the various elements addressed in this chapter, it is worth looking at the career of Enrico Brizzi, which encompasses the phases in the periodisation of the New Italian Epic outlined here. As well as coming from the Bologna environment and being

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<sup>119</sup> *Manifesto TQ*, <http://download.repubblica.it/pdf/2011/Manifesto-TQ.pdf> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>120</sup> See Prudenzeno 2013. They last tweeted in April 2013: <https://twitter.com/GenerazioneTQ>; however, their Facebook page continues to be active: <https://www.facebook.com/generazionetq/timeline> (accessed 07.08.15).

involved with the Luther Blissett Project,<sup>121</sup> he was seen as a Cannibal writer with his 1996 text *Bastogne*, which featured the classic pulp mix of drugs, violence and the vacuity of the contemporary world that I addressed in the first section of this chapter. Yet, like Wu Ming and other New Italian Epic writers that I discussed in the second section, he was born in, and inspired by, the protest decade of the seventies. Specifically, Bernardi states: ‘Brizzi has often emphasised the importance of 1977 for his intellectual development, interpreting his identification with the social and cultural turmoil of that period as a counterpart to his cultural alienation from the 1990s’ (2006: 187).<sup>122</sup> Like Nove, he would later move away from Cannibal writing into New Italian Epic territory, as seen in his *Epoepa Fantastorica Italiana*, the first volume of which, *L’inattesa piega degli eventi* (2008), is mentioned in the Memorandum on the New Italian Epic (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 13n5). The trilogy re-imagines the fascist period with Mussolini not siding with Hitler in the Second World War, and thus retaining power after the conflict ends. It also revisits Italian colonialism, as the main protagonist is sent in the first novel to cover the football league in an Africa still colonised by Italy, reflecting in some ways the changing history and memory practices that began in and around the nineties, outlined earlier in this chapter. The second novel in this trilogy, *La Nostra guerra* came out in 2009, then the final novel, *Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne*, in 2012, once again signalling that, as discussed in the third section of this chapter, work on the issues that interest New Italian Epic writers and others has not ceased since 2008.

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<sup>121</sup> Given the anonymous nature of the project, it is difficult to confirm to what extent he was involved with Luther Blissett, but he at least took an interest in their activities, as seen by his article in *L’Unità* on their text *Mind Invaders. Come fottare I media. Manuale di guerriglia e sabotaggio culturale*, which is available in the Luther Blissett online archive, where they also mention and undermine rumours of Brizzi being expelled from the project: [http://www.lutherblissett.net/archive/123\\_it.html](http://www.lutherblissett.net/archive/123_it.html) (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>122</sup> This can be seen clearly in Brizzi’s literary début, *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo*, in which the main protagonist, Alex, is obsessed with his uncle’s *Frigidaire* magazines, and, even though he does not fully understand the seventies and sees them more in terms of music and magazines, he believes they represent a time that is superior to his present in the early nineties.

Overall, as arguable as some aspects of Wu Ming 1's periodisation of the phenomenon are, looking at and around the three key years that he individuates indicates a series of key features on the national and international level that have filtered into these narratives. From broader changes in history/historiography, the arrival of migrant writers and the innovations of Cannibal writing in the nineties, to the convergent twenty-first century ushered in by violent events that were both highly affecting but fragmentary and mediated, bringing to the fore the desire of some for a generational political identity that may remain elusive in the digital age, there have been a host of influences on the writers of the nebula, which continue to affect these and other writers today.

## ~ CHAPTER THREE ~

### The Recurring Theme of ‘la Morte del Vecchio’

As signalled by the title of Wu Ming 1’s talk on the New Italian Epic, ‘Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori’, concerns about parental legacies and responsibility are key to the phenomenon. The New Italian Epic writers have repeatedly staged and explored the death of the father, which has strong links to Italy’s current social and political situation, and can be read through a psychoanalytical lens. Whilst I will be primarily employing the work of the Italian psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati in this chapter, I also refer to Peter Brooks, who drew on Freud to show the role of plot in expressing conscious and unconscious desires in *Reading for the Plot*. The 19<sup>th</sup> century novels he analysed were specifically preoccupied with fatherhood and legitimacy, and the conditions that Brooks described as characteristic of these texts and at the root of their structural force – ‘the conflict of movement and resistance, revolution and restoration, and [...] the issues of authority and paternity’ (1984: 65) – have parallels in the conditions that I will put forward as creating the repetition compulsion, to use Freud, of continually revisiting ‘la morte del Vecchio’ in the New Italian Epic texts. A similar social and political climate of dealing with the aftermath of failed ideals and negotiating between tradition and innovation are present in the conditions surrounding these 21<sup>st</sup> century Italian writers, and thus similar parallels can be drawn between their narratives’ subject matter and their writers’ (and readers’) anxieties and desires. Although Umberto Saba famously pointed out that Italian history was characterised by fratricide rather than



patricide,<sup>123</sup> the insistence of Wu Ming 1 and other recent authors on the theme of ‘la morte del Vecchio’ could be read as a desire to push forward change and break with the past, at a point in time that has been seen as one of political, economic and cultural crisis in Italy; as Saba states: ‘è solo col parricidio (uccisione del vecchio) che si inizia una rivoluzione’ (1993: 16).

This chapter begins with examining the theory and possible father figures that can be associated with this theme. The analysis then centres round two writers whose portrayals of absent father figures in their narratives are distinctly contrasting. In *Medium* and *Italia De Profundis*, Giuseppe Genna takes an autofictional approach in two very different directions, whilst in both texts linking the story of the author’s own father’s death with national issues. De Cataldo’s *Nelle mani giuste*, on the other hand, portrays a shadowy father figure known as ‘il Vecchio’, an imaginary secret puppet master controlling the Italian state until the early nineties, involved in various conspiracies and unsolved mysteries in Italy’s recent past. De Cataldo traces the period after his death in order to chart the rise of Berlusconi and how we arrived at today’s situation. Yet, as my analysis will show, both authors use the death of a patriarch to represent the end of an era and a lens through which to examine the past, present and future of Italy.

I have chosen to focus on texts by Genna and De Cataldo as they make explicit connections between their stories and Italy’s current situation, connecting New Italian Epic ideas about paternity, responsibility and *impegno* in their unidentified narrative objects. However, the subject matter of ‘la morte del Vecchio’ does resurface in other texts in the

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<sup>123</sup> ‘Vi siete mai chiesti perché l’Italia non ha avuta, in tutta la sua storia – da Roma ad oggi – una sola vera rivoluzione? La risposta – chiave che apre molte porte – è forse la storia d’Italia in poche righe. /Gli italiani non sono parricidi; sono fratricidi. Romolo e Remo, Ferruccio e Maramaldo, Mussolini e i socialisti, Badoglio e Graziani... “Combatteremo – fece stampare quest’ultimo in un suo manifesto – *fratelli contro fratelli*”. [...] Gli italiani sono l’unico popolo (credo) che abbiano, alla base della loro storia (o della loro leggenda) un fratricidio’ (Saba 1993: 16).

New Italian Epic corpus, albeit in slightly different forms, as Wu Ming 1 points out in the Memorandum (2009a: 74): in Wu Ming's *Manituana*, the Iroquois are struggling with the fallout of the death of Sir William Johnson; in Giovanni Maria Bellu's *L'uomo che volle essere Perón*, the autofictional protagonist refers to his deceased father as 'il Vecchio'; and, in Jones' *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, the deceased father-figure of Tito can be seen as at the root of the current conflict in the Balkans. There are also certain texts that are absent from Wu Ming 1's list but similarly deal with generational problems and troubled legacies that lend themselves to a psychoanalytical reading, for example: much of Muratori's<sup>124</sup> and Scurati's<sup>125</sup> work, Siti's *Troppi paradisi*, which portrays the death of the autofictional protagonist's father,<sup>126</sup> or Luther Blissett's *Q*, whose eponymous protagonist resembles De Cataldo's *Grande Vecchio*, controlling events from behind the scenes. Wu Ming's more recent novel, *L'Armata dei Sonnambuli*, about the French Revolution, is bookended by the deaths of two father figures – the king at the beginning and Robespierre at the end – and, naturally, provides some fascinating parallels with the narratives Brooks analyses. Other omissions that would not be out of place on the list are Janeczek's *Lezioni di tenebra* and *Le rondini di Montecassino*, which explore what Hirsch has called postmemory, tracing the after-effects of previous generations' experiences on us today through an autofictional lens.

I would point out that Wu Ming 1's discussion of this theme has a clearly gendered slant, with the only exception indicated in his list that explores the death of a female

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<sup>124</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere (Willman 2015), Muratori's texts frequently feature problematic mothers and absent fathers in ways that link them to Recalcati's psychoanalytical theory.

<sup>125</sup> I refer particularly to his recent *Il padre infedele*, although he also explores paternity and generational problems elsewhere. *Il sopravvissuto* examines the story of a boy who walks into his final school exam and shoots all of his teachers except one. Both Jacopo and Aspasia are orphans in *Una storia romantica*, which, as I explore in the following chapter, deals with ideas related to political disillusionment in common with other texts about paternity. In *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo*, his autofictional protagonist's girlfriend discovers she is pregnant much to his chagrin, as he did not want to have children, and his explorations of a case of paedophilia are intertwined with troubled recollections from his own childhood.

<sup>126</sup> The narrator ironically states: 'l'evento archetipo chiamato "la morte del padre" sta accadendo ora, potrò analizzarlo e raccontarlo' (Siti 2006: 181). As discussed in the previous chapter, this text is very much concerned with issues of consumerism and enjoyment that are at the centre of Recalcati's work, as we shall see.

progenitor being Andrea Bajani's *Se consideri le colpe* (Wu Ming 2009a: 74).<sup>127</sup> Recalcati emphasises that when he refers to 'padri' gender is not important, and that he does not necessarily mean a family member (2011: 15), yet, his discussion, like the portrayals that Wu Ming 1 holds up as exemplary of the theme, tends to hinge on either or both of these elements. However, Recalcati's most recent text, *Le mani della madre*, has moved his discussion of inheritance to considerations about the mother figure, and he argues that maternal inheritance 'concerna la dimensione della vita come tale, il diritto di esistere, il diritto di essere nel mondo' (2015: 154), seeming to cast maternity in ethical terms, related to the endowment of meaning in life. Likewise, there is an ethical impetus behind a need to think about the maternal and not only the paternal. Recalcati tells us in the epilogue to *Le mani della madre*: 'Ho scritto questo libro perché volevo essere giusto con la madre' (2015: 183). It would also be fair to the mother – and productive – to explore the New Italian Epic's presentations of motherhood, as seen in Bajani's text, which Recalcati examines (2015: 128-130), but also in Wu Ming's *Manituana*,<sup>128</sup> or in the work of Muratori.<sup>129</sup> Motherhood in Italy has been given greater attention in recent years: it is a common theme chosen by writers for

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<sup>127</sup> Bajani's subsequent *Ogni promessa* also deals with generational problems, but in terms of fatherhood and grandfatherhood. The main protagonist Pietro wants to have a baby with his girlfriend Sara, but he needs to deal with the ghosts of the past first, namely the experience of his maternal grandfather, Mario, who fought on the Russian Front during the Second World War, and later suffered from mental health issues. Pietro's father banned him from seeing Mario as a child, and Mario is now dead. Pietro embarks on a journey to Russia exploring personal and collective history, as coming to terms with the past and uncovering family secrets are linked to taking responsibility for the present and future, as in Genna's *Medium*, as we shall see.

<sup>128</sup> This can be seen in the figure of the matriarch Molly Brant, although she cannot participate in the action with the men. Her supernatural powers are passed onto Esther Johnson, Sir William's great-niece, and when Peter, Molly and William's son, is killed, there is a sense that the succession of power in the family might be matrilineal in the future.

<sup>129</sup> Whilst much of Muratori's work engages with these issues in interesting ways, *La vita in comune* is particularly relevant given that it entwines considerations about generational relationships – addressing all different types of familial ties as well as containing a transnational dimension – with ecological concerns, considering 'L'eredità terrestre' (Muratori 2007: 277), which resonates with my discussion in the conclusion to this chapter.

their novels,<sup>130</sup> which have in turn been examined in academic texts,<sup>131</sup> and feminist thinkers, such as Luisa Muraro, have also focussed on motherhood, exploring the importance of female experience and relationships long before Recalcati.<sup>132</sup> Yet, considerations of the maternal and mother-daughter relationships are overlooked in discussions surrounding the New Italian Epic, partly due to the fact that its corpus is heavily dominated by male writers and portrayals of male experience, as I discussed in chapter one. At the end of this chapter, I suggest that such myopia excludes some interesting and, indeed, important avenues of exploration for these writers when considering inheritance and responsibility.

### **‘La nostra condizione di postumi’**

Wu Ming 1 explains in the Memorandum that the recurring theme of the death of the father is connected with what he calls ‘la nostra condizione di postumi’, as this generation feels it is always post-something: ‘postfascisti, postcomunisti, post-postmoderni, Seconda Repubblica, eccetera’ (2009a: 74). These various relevant aspects will be further explored in this section, where they will also be linked to the work of Recalcati, which Wu Ming 1 has drawn on (2010c). Recalcati has described the implications of an age characterised by what he calls, after Lacan, ‘l’evaporazione del Padre’ (2011: 13), drawing on Freudian and

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<sup>130</sup> Sambuco points to the growth of interest in examining the mother-daughter relationship since the 1980s, as seen, for example, in the work of Francesca Sanvitale, Fabrizia Ramondino and Elena Stancanelli (2012: 5). Perhaps it is also worth considering the New Italian Epic concerns about parenthood in relation to the work of Elena Ferrante. She is not included in the nebula, although her Neapolitan novels examine Italy’s past and present through a personal but political gaze, and her anonymity as an author is more complete than that of Wu Ming. Giorgio Vasta’s *Il tempo materiale* also contains interesting parallels with the nebula’s generational concerns, looking at Moro’s kidnapping through the eyes of children who attempt to re-enact it.

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Adalgisa Giorgio’s edited volume *Writing Mothers and Daughters* (2002), Laura Benedetti’s *Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (2006), or Patrizia Sambuco’s *Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth Century Italian Women’s Writing* (2012). See also the AHRC-funded network ‘La Mamma Italiana: Interrogating a National Stereotype’ (project blog here: <https://lamammaitaliana.wordpress.com/>).

<sup>132</sup> Yet, Muraro is only briefly mentioned by Recalcati in a footnote (2015: 62n31). Despite this limited acknowledgement, his move away from the father-son perspective is welcome, particularly from someone with such cultural currency in Italy today.

Lacanian theories about the father as representative of the social order and also as a regulator of desire, connected to the symbolic order. He has looked at narratives from both within,<sup>133</sup> and outside of,<sup>134</sup> Italy to show the ways in which they express our unease in the modern world and explore ways of receiving guidance through testimony from our ‘parents’ (biological or otherwise), whilst also finding independence and assuming responsibility. Such ideas also come into play in the narratives analysed in this chapter.

Let us start with Wu Ming 1’s suggestion that this generation are ‘postfascisti’. After the fight to liberate Italy in the Second World War and the ensuing years of literary *impegno* culminating in the sixties, certain critics have argued that this generation is divorced from political and ethical commitment, has no conflicts or wars to fight, and is instead bombarded with images from the mass media that stop them truly connecting with reality. ‘La televisione è stata il nostro Vietnam’, Giglioli states provocatively (2011: 17). Yet, the protests and *impegno* of previous generations can also be seen in terms of failings related to fatherhood. Lacan connected his ideas about the decline of the father to the revolutionary changes of the sixties; as Recalcati points out, the French psychoanalytical theorist described them in terms of ‘la lotta dei figli contro l’autoritarismo borghese del padre padrone’ (2011: 37). This was the time of the symbolic Oedipal father characterised by Freud and later Lacan,<sup>135</sup> a controlling authority that a generation attempted to overthrow in 1968.<sup>136</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s *L’anti-Oedipe* (1972), which came out in Italian in 1975,<sup>137</sup> ushered in a new,

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<sup>133</sup> For example, Nanni Moretti’s film *Habemus papam* (Recalcati 2013a: 20-21) or Tornatore’s film *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (Recalcati 2013a: 142).

<sup>134</sup> For example, Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (Recalcati 2011: 155-170) or Clint Eastwood’s films *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino* (Recalcati 2011: 171-189).

<sup>135</sup> For Lacan, the father ‘is the representative of the social order as such, and only by identifying with the father in the Oedipus complex can the subject gain entry into this order’ (Evans 1996: 61). Recalcati moves away from this conception of the father, as we shall see.

<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, Recalcati sees the more recent developments surrounding Beppe Grillo’s M5S as falling into a similar trap as the protests of the sixties, desiring more direct democracy but actually weakening democracy through getting rid of the institutions as mediators: ‘finisce per gettare via insieme all’acqua sporca della democrazia anche il suo bambino’ (2013a: 67).

<sup>137</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L’Anti-Edipo*, Alessandro Fontana (trans.) (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).

decentred and rhizomatic paradigm. Recalcati has said of *L'anti-Oedipe*: 'ha mobilitato alla rivolta un'intera generazione, la mia, quella del '77' (2013a: 103).<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Deleuze's influence can be detected in Radio Alice, the Bolognese independent radio station linked to the political protests of 1977, which Wu Ming wrote about in their screenplay for the film *Lavorare con lentezza*, and which was partly named after Lewis Carroll's text that Deleuze analysed at the beginning of his *Logique du sens*.<sup>139</sup> The protests and violence in Bologna in the late seventies have also been an important reference point for the New Italian Epic writers, as we saw in the previous chapter.<sup>140</sup>

Recalcati argues that getting rid of paternal authority in the sixties and seventies only ushered in new forms of repression, and paradoxically led to the strengthening of capitalism and the wish for unlimited enjoyment at the root of many societal problems today. As one of the protagonists of Muratori's *Il giorno dell'indipendenza* describes his former life as a banker and cocaine addict: 'Niente padri, solo patrimonio' (2009: 33). We now have the hypermodern fantasy of being the liberated 'I', free of responsibility and with no sense of the consequences to our acts (Recalcati 2013a: 46-8). There is a danger in the contemporary world of adults disappearing; instead of positive father figures, the prevalent model has become that of 'la figura del *genitore-figlio*' who has abdicated responsibility (Recalcati 2013a: 59). Recalcati argues that we no longer live under the sign of Oedipus, nor anti-Oedipus, and instead puts forward today's model of the son as Telemachus, searching the horizon for his father, who represents liberty through the proper transmission of the Law

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<sup>138</sup> Indeed, it is entirely appropriate that Wu Ming 1 referenced Recalcati's ideas when talking about twenty-first century *impegno*, as Recalcati has made strong links between his politics and his psychoanalytical work; he told Christian Raimo in an interview: 'Tutti i miei testi sono fortemente segnati dal passaggio dalla politica alla clinica' (Recalcati 2013b: 15).

<sup>139</sup> The name was also inspired by one of the radio station's female founders, the daughter of Dadi Mariotti (see 'Cronologia di Radio Alice', [http://www.radiomarconi.com/marconi/ancona/valcamonica/amarcord/radio\\_pag05.html](http://www.radiomarconi.com/marconi/ancona/valcamonica/amarcord/radio_pag05.html)) (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>140</sup> In terms of the texts that address the theme of 'la morte del Vecchio', the father-son relationship in Bellu's *L'uomo che volle essere Perón* stages the conflicts in the father-son relationship in terms of the autofictional protagonist's *impegno* as a member of the '77 generation versus his father's fascist background.

(2013a: 12). This Law is not related to authoritarianism or punishment, but rather is understood as the passing on of testimony to show that '*la vita può avere un senso*' (2013a: 14).

Wu Ming 1 shares a similar opinion to Recalcati about what this generation has inherited from previous generations, as he explains in 'Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori':

I tempi in cui viviamo sono condizionati dalla morte dei fondatori, dei 'capostipiti', dei genitori che se ne sono andati lasciandoci con problemi enormi. Noi siamo gli eredi delle loro allucinazioni, ormai ci rendiamo conto che la crescita, lo sviluppo, il consumismo, il prodotto interno lordo, tutto questo ci fa correre su un binario morto, e ci chiediamo se lungo la corsa vedremo uno scambio, e chi scenderà ad azionare la leva (2009b: 118).

Both Recalcati and Wu Ming 1 draw a line from the illusions of their parents' protest generation to the current problems of late capitalist society. The after-effects of their parents' actions have left this generation searching for some kind of order and desire for progenitors who can hand on responsibility to them, rather than leaving them waiting and watching the sea for a return, or in Wu Ming 1's terms, for someone who can help steer a different course. Wu Ming 1 implies that it is precisely the New Italian Epic engaged writers who can initiate this change.

Pasolini is also an interesting reference in relation to the sixties and seventies, as in some ways he can be seen as the deceased father of intellectual *impegno*, even if he never styled himself as a paternal figure. In *Dimenticare Pasolini*, a text that seeks to more critically evaluate this now mythologised figure, and investigate how nostalgia about him illustrates the current Italian cultural climate, Antonello repeatedly refers to Pasolini's

influence today in terms of inheritance: he describes ‘un continuo e sempre rinnovato dibattito sulla sua eredità, sul suo lascito testimoniale’ (2012: 97), and asks in terms that strongly recall Recalcati: ‘Cosa ci resta della sua eredità? Cosa dobbiamo farcene della sua lezione? Come recuperarla, se recuperarla è possibile?’ (2012: 100). Pasolini, whilst being an inspiration to recent writers, particularly those associated with the New Italian Epic (see chapter one), also overshadows their work due to the tendency of critics and the media to evoke him in exemplary and hagiographical terms, something that Antonello rightly calls into question. There is a sense that the past, that of the parents of these recent writers, looms over their attempts at finding new ways of engaging with national issues. The protest generation of the sixties and seventies, for all its failures, continues to be held up in Italy, and, indeed, in the western world in general, as more politically active, revolutionary, resistant to authority, whilst the younger generation sits passively in front of television and computer screens, failing to get in touch with reality. Antonello points out that in Italy this is more acute given ‘l’antropologia paternalistica che caratterizza la società e la cultura italiane’ (2012: 23), as shown by the recent movement known as the TQ (*trentenni-quarantenni*), whose 2011 manifesto protested against their generation’s exclusion from the country’s ‘vita politica e produttiva’ (see chapter two). As Antonello states, it is striking that they framed this protest precisely in terms of age (2012: 23), demonstrating the clear presence of generational conflict in Italian public life that has spilled over into cultural production. The writers associated with the New Italian Epic have also attempted to fight against limiting views of their effectiveness and, as we shall see, in some ways recuperate Pasolini’s legacy for the twenty-first century.

Being ‘postcomunisti’ refers to the problems related to the end of the First Republic and the dissolution of the Italian Communist party (PCI). Wu Ming 1 has posited that Enrico Berlinguer, national secretary of the PCI in the seventies and eighties, could be seen as a father figure who has now been lost (2010a). Recalcati speaks in similar terms, characterising



the conflicts within the PCI in terms of Berlinguer trying to establish some kind of order or paternal authority (2013b: 46),<sup>141</sup> whilst the party's demise can be connected to a loss of symbolic ideals, as seen in Nanni Moretti's 1989 film *Palombella rossa*, which shows the disorientation that the end of the First Republic brought with it (Recalcati 2013a: 22-3). Not coincidentally, the front cover of Antonello and Mussnug's *Postmodern Impegno* (2009) shows a still from *Palombella rossa*, suggesting the importance of considerations about the end of the First Republic and the fall of the PCI in shaping contemporary forms of commitment. Nostalgia about Berlinguer can be very much detected on the Italian scene today, in Walter Veltroni's wistful 2014 documentary *Quando c'era Berlinguer*, for example, or Francesco Piccolo's Strega prize-winning *Il desiderio di essere come tutti* (2013), which charts the autofictional protagonist's life story alongside his admiration for the Communist party leader in a first section called 'Io e Berlinguer', then, after his death, in a second section called 'Io e Berlusconi'.

The trajectory charted by Piccolo is similar to that indicated by Wu Ming 1 for the New Italian Epic, as we have seen. This generation has been portrayed by Wu Ming 1 as searching for symbolic parents after the end of the First Republic, but they have been unable to find anyone to counteract the empty consumerist enjoyment of modern Italy, or 'azionare la leva' to use his earlier metaphor. In a blog post on *Giap*, entitled 'Note sul "Potere Pappone" in Italia', Wu Ming 1 states that Berlusconi, rather than being able to fill the void left empty by the deaths of various 'fathers' before him, was only 'un vuoto circondato di vuoto, un buco nel grande buco lasciato dalla scomparsa dei genitori' (2010a). As well as referencing Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, and employing psychoanalytic terminology, Wu Ming 1 draws strongly on the theories of Recalcati, and refers to him directly in the notes at

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<sup>141</sup> Recalcati: 'non era un caso che Berlinguer in quegli anni predicasse proprio la centralità della questione morale, ovvero la necessità di mettere un limite, di introdurre un senso condiviso della Legge, di entrare in una relazione critica con il fantasma del discorso capitalistia' (2013b: 46).

the end of the post.<sup>142</sup> Wu Ming 1's description of Berlusconi seems to typify Recalcati's model of the *genitore-figlio*, a comparison that is not overlooked by Recalcati himself, who states that, although the problems he describes in terms of fatherhood are present in other countries too, they are given particular accent in contemporary Italy due to the lack of responsibility on the political scene making it resemble 'un party adolescenziale forsennato' (2013a: 78). According to Recalcati, and to Wu Ming 1, we are in need of another vision to the dominant 'versione cinico-materialistica del godimento' (2011: 14) associated with Berlusconi. It is striking that all of the texts mentioned by Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum in relation to the theme of 'la morte del Vecchio', as well as Genna's *Italia De Profundis* and Muratori's *La casa madre* and *La vita in comune*, were written between 2007 and 2008, as was the Memorandum itself. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this was when the Prodi government was crumbling and, once again, Berlusconi was returning to power under the auspices of the newly named Popolo della Libertà. Thus, we can see issues connected to the Second Republic relating to a lack of positive authority figures and its expression in these texts.

Italian writers have been seen as having similar failures to their politicians, shying away from ethical responsibility to engage seriously with this reality. Significantly, late twentieth century literature was diagnosed as being in a posthumous condition by Ferroni in his 1996 text *Dopo la fine. Sulla condizione postuma della letteratura*, and late-postmodernism has been seen as symptomatic of this condition due to its irony and alleged disengagement, in contrast to the overtly politically committed writing that came before it. As discussed in chapter one, Wu Ming 1's title 'Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori' comes from a quotation from David Foster Wallace, who was describing the way in which postmodernist

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<sup>142</sup> He directs readers towards a video of the psychoanalyst talking about his 2010 book *L'uomo senza inconscio* (Wu Ming 1 2010a).

writing had descended into a lack of any rules and a feeling that there was a need for some kind of authority that would have to come from this generation. Wallace states: ‘The postmodern founders’ patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years’ (McCaffery 1993: 150). Wu Ming 1 made his speech ‘Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori’ in the wake of Wallace’s suicide, the death of a literary father figure that we will see Genna address in *Italia De Profundis*. The theme of the death of the father can therefore also be related to a need to overcome an idea of writing as ironic, tongue-in-cheek and self-referential play, ‘Postmodernismi da quattro soldi’ as Wu Ming 1 calls it (2009a: 63), although, as I have already argued, and as we will see once again here, the putative lack of engagement of postmodernism and rupture between the New Italian Epic and what came before are based on a series of misconceptions.

Indeed, it would not be inappropriate to see recent Italian writers’ rejection of postmodernism in terms of an attempt at separation from their fathers, or a misunderstanding of their literary inheritance. In *Senza padri*, Godani argues that recent proclamations of the end of postmodernism and the beginning of a new realism are artificially pitting ‘l’era dell’autenticità contro lo sperimentalismo e la sovversione dei codici’ (2014: 34), with the latter associated with the fatherless state that Recalcati and others have described. Godani suggests that not only is this a misunderstanding of postmodernism, but also that such experimentation should be seen in a positive light, just as he argues that the return of fathers should not be wished for, but rather their absence can be seen as liberating, bringing with it new possibilities: ‘quella dissoluzione figura semmai come la condizione di una “comunità” di eguali, senza legami fissi’ (2014: 20). Godani’s analysis of recent texts and films shows that: ‘non solo contribuiscano attivamente, con le loro sperimentazioni, alla moderna dissoluzione dei limiti e dei legami, ma di questa dissoluzione si trovino a esaltare la portata

liberatoria' (2014: 13). In the course of this chapter, we will see that the New Italian Epic texts that analyse the death of the father similarly incorporate postmodernist experimentation, even if it is not acknowledged as such, and there is a sense of freedom, or at least of openness, in this experimentation, as well as in the future of their (auto)fictional protagonists and of Italy.

As the reference to Wallace suggests, such ideas surrounding postmodernism/experimentation versus realism/responsibility are not only part of the conversation in Italy; for example, the British writer Edward Docx has proclaimed postmodernism dead, welcoming in an 'Age of Authenticism' (2011).<sup>143</sup> Moreover, the theme of the death of the father has also been addressed in various contemporary autobiographical/autofictional texts by writers from other countries, who have approached it from different angles, but bring to the fore some of the issues we will see in this chapter. A *Death in the Family* (2009), the first volume of Karl Ove Knausgaard's six autobiographical novels collectively called *Min kamp* (*My Struggle*), deals with the death of the Norwegian author's father; Javier Cercas' *Soldados de Salamina* (*Soldiers of Salamis*) (2001) and Michel Houellebecq's *Plateforme* (*Platform*) (2001) both open with the death of their respective autofictional narrators' fathers; Zachary Lazar has embarked on an investigation of his father's final days in *Evening's Empire: The Story of My Father's Murder* (2009); and Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* (2005) imagines the American author's father coming back to haunt him and his family from beyond the grave.<sup>144</sup> A little further back, but still relevant – and

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<sup>143</sup> This is also referenced by Godani (2014: 33-4). Interestingly in terms of echoes of the New Italian Epic, Docx sees long-form novels like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as part of this supposed authenticity.

<sup>144</sup> We can see parallels between *Lunar Park* and *Medium*, and, indeed, Genna (2005) reviewed Ellis' book for *Carmilla*, showing a clear line of influence. *Lunar Park*, as we shall see in *Medium*, begins in a more mimetic mode before moving into supernatural imaginings. The American author insists, as Genna does in his subtitle to *Medium*, on the veracity of this story: 'Regardless of how horrible the events described here might seem, there's one thing you must remember as you hold this book in your hands: all of it really happened, every word is true' (2005: 45). Yet, also like Genna, this is undermined by the far-fetched supernatural story.

analysed by Recalcati (2011: 119-153) – is Philip Roth’s 1991 text *Patrimony: A True Story*, which depicts the decline and death of the American author’s father.<sup>145</sup>

In these texts, as in the New Italian Epic nebula, dealing with the death of the father is often linked with an investigation into the past, which may reflect on both personal and national history. These are problematic pasts, tied up with fathers that their sons never truly knew or understood, although they seek to now. Recalcati says in relation to Roth’s text: ‘La morte del padre pone [...] il problema delle nostre radici, della nostra provenienza e dell’impossibilità che queste radici e questa stessa provenienza giungano a costituire un terreno solido, sicuro, al riparo dall’aleatorietà della vita’ (2011: 124). There will always be gaps in what these writers know of their fathers, particularly now they are dead, but they strive for that solid terrain that will always elude them in their books.<sup>146</sup> The gaps between fiction and reality that are foregrounded in autofiction mean that it has been a frequent choice of genre to depict this unstable relationship with our fathers and our roots. In figuratively bringing their fathers back to life in their narratives, there is an almost supernatural operation at work for these writers, which we will see also in Genna’s *Medium*. They are both haunted by their fathers – literally in the case of Ellis’ text – and resurrect them for their readers – Lazar twice talks of his text as ‘A kind of conjuration’ (2009: 15 and 52). As their fathers engendered these writers, so they create their texts, and their fathers’ deaths ambivalently evoke both mourning and inspiration for literary production. Recalcati casts literary

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<sup>145</sup> Again, this begs the question: what about mothers? I have only come across one recent example of an autobiographical text dealing with the death of a mother: Tracy Smith’s *Ordinary Light: A Memoir* (2015). Given that it is a memoir, it is closer to Knausgaard’s or Roth’s testimony than Ellis’ or Genna’s clear fictionalising.

<sup>146</sup> Knausgaard often brings to the fore the double view he has of his father, combining memories from his childhood and his view now that he is older and a father himself. In an episode near the beginning of the text, he states: ‘My picture of my father on that evening in 1976 is [...] twofold: on the one hand I see him as I saw him then, through the eyes of an eight-year-old: unpredictable and frightening; on the other hand, I see him as a peer through whose life time is blowing and unremittingly sweeping large chunks of meaning along with it’ (2014: 12). Lazar combines memories, testimonies from friends and family and archival documents in a process that he describes as ‘reconstructing an old mosaic with only a few of the tiles, letting the fragments suggest what might have been in the missing spaces’ (2009: 53).

production precisely in terms of inheritance when discussing Roth's *Patrimony*: 'È l'eredità che è stata trasmessa e che ritorna nella forma della scrittura: scrivere è registrare, raccogliere tracce, produrre tracce, ritornare continuamente per vie differenti sulle impronte del passato, tornarci seguendo altre impronte per lasciarne altre ancora, per produrre ulteriori nuove tracce' (2011: 153).

Such investigations into the past are comparable to the work of psychoanalysis, which requires digging into the patient's memories, uncovering fragments in an operation that Freud characterised as archaeological.<sup>147</sup> We see a similar operation in the New Italian Epic nebula: in *L'uomo che volle essere Perón*, Bellu investigates claims that the Argentinian dictator Juan Perón was Sardinian; in Bajani's *Se consideri le colpe*, the main protagonist travels to Romania to learn about his deceased mother's life there. Both narrators specifically refer to dealing with ruins or debris in their investigation into their parents, giving archaeological resonances to their searches: Bajani's Lorenzo sorts through 'le macerie del passato' (2007: 51), and Bellu states: 'I padri possono nascondere gli album di guerra, ma non le macerie' (2008: 347). Like Genna and De Cataldo, as we shall see, they search for ways to process the past in order to move forward in the future.

Proper inheritance is both a separation from and a recognition of our progenitors and the past. Recalcati tells us: 'L'evaporazione del padre può diventare una condizione per l'invenzione se però la *rinuncia al padre* diventa cosa ben diversa dal *rifiuto del padre*' (2013a: 94). Accepting our fathers' legacy must be neither a slavish and nostalgic imitation

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<sup>147</sup> This comparison appears early on in Freud's work in his 'Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria': 'In face of the incompleteness of my analytic results, I had no choice but to follow the example of those discoverers whose good fortune it is to bring to the light of day after their long burial the priceless though mutilated relics of antiquity. I have restored what is missing, taking the best models known to me from other analyses; but, like a conscientious archaeologist, I have not omitted to mention in each case where the authentic parts end and my constructions begin' (1953: 12). Recalcati has written about this Freudian metaphor, trying to prove that 'L'archeologia-archivio di Freud non è però così ingenua come si portrebbe pensare a prima vista' (2007: 67).

of them, nor a complete rupture with what came before, and we will see the texts analysed in this chapter negotiating these tensions. Dionigi speaks of inheritance in terms of classics, and states that the ways in which new generations re-invent tradition shows that inheritance is always a mixture of innovation and conservation (2012). This can clearly be seen in the New Italian Epic phenomenon, which, as its name indicates, is both new but recalling an epic tradition, takes ideas related to the tradition of *impegno* in new directions, and, for all its claims of being distinct from postmodernism, does in some ways employ a postmodern approach, as we shall see. Dionigi says of heredity: ‘a differenza di Orfeo, abbiamo la necessità e la responsabilità di voltarci indietro e di guardare il passato senza farlo morire’ (2012: 45); the New Italian Epic writers look back and simultaneously look forward in their texts, and not only those that deal with ‘la morte del Vecchio’.

### ***Medium and Italia De Profundis* by Giuseppe Genna**

Genna’s highly innovative work forms an important component of the nebula, engaging very directly with the points set out by Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum. Here we will examine his text *Medium*, published online in 2007, and *Italia De Profundis*, published in print a year later, which both open with the death of his father, before going onto ask questions about history and literature in today’s world. His father’s death was a real-life event that Wu Ming 1 refers to at the beginning of ‘Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori’, but in the two novels it is explored through the lens of the character Giuseppe Genna in two different ways. Whilst in *Medium* it leads to an investigation into his father’s and Italy’s past that culminates in supernatural revelations, *Italia De Profundis* goes on to relate a series of fragmentary experiences that followed in what is a critique of modern-day Italy, ‘un luogo che ho disimparato ad amare’ (11). Although Vito Genna’s death was something that Giuseppe

Genna actually lived through, it was also, as Wu Ming 1 points out, ‘un’esperienza allegorica soverchiante’ (2009b: 103), and this can be seen by the ways in which it is woven into these narratives.<sup>148</sup>

In *Medium*, the death of Vito Genna suggests the end of an era, reflecting Wu Ming 1’s idea of being ‘postcomunisti’. Vito was a staunch communist and travelled to East Germany during the eighties; the text centres round that period as Giuseppe tries to understand his father’s involvement with communism. Before his death, Vito was living in a now very right-wing Milan, a sick old man and an alcoholic, as if unable to cope with modern-day Italy in which his ideals have been set aside. Wu Ming 1 explains:

Il padre di Giuseppe Genna aveva dedicato buona parte della vita a un partito che non esisteva più, nella speranza di una rivoluzione che non c’era stata, nel quadro di una sinistra politica che moriva in metafora mentre lui moriva *alla lettera*, moriva di cancro in un appartamento desolato di una città desolata e conquistata dalla destra tanto tempo prima. Un infarto improvviso gli aveva risparmiato mesi di strazio, e il figlio aveva sentimenti contrastanti: aveva il cuore a pezzi, ma provava sollievo.

Il figlio sapeva che la morte del padre stava per la morte di un’epoca, la morte di un mondo. Il lutto per il padre era anche il lutto per l’epoca (2009b: 104).

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<sup>148</sup> It is worth pointing out that Genna also deals with fatherhood in his later text, *Fine impero*, although from a different perspective, opening with the funeral of the main protagonist’s baby daughter and exploring not the loss of a father but the condition of a mourning father. The narrator asks: ‘Perché nella antica lingua italiana, letteraria fino dai primordi, non esiste un termine che indichi il contrario della condizione di “orfano”? Che cosa sono un padre e una madre che perdono un figlio, una figlia?’ (2013: 32). As with *Italia De Profundis*, the ensuing story examines the emptiness of modern-day Italy, reflecting, and reflecting on, the difficulties of textual representation today: ‘A fine impero è possibile descrivere soltanto. Non rappresentare, non troppo fingere’ (128). There are overlaps between the main protagonist and the autofictional Genna we will see in this chapter: his father was an alcoholic and a communist who died of cancer and had tried to commit suicide in the past. We also see the protagonist interviewing Houellebecq. Genna’s work tends to work in this way, with texts picking up the themes of previous ones and re-examining them from another perspective. There are several strands that can be identified in Genna’s *oeuvre*; aside from those that look at parenthood and responsibility in the modern world, there are considerations of figures of evil, as seen in *Hitler* and *La vita umana sul pianeta terra*, and there are those that examine conspiracy theories, such as *Dies irae* and *Nel nome di Ishmael*.



Giuseppe goes through his father's books on communism, relics of a now distant past, where he finds a clue to unlocking what his father did in Germany, a letter written by the mysterious 'G' that can help answer his question: “*Chi era mio padre?*”.<sup>149</sup> He first goes to the communist archives in Rome in order to begin to truly understand his personal and political past, and, whilst there, communist imagery merges in his mind with memories of his father in ‘un passato che nell’infanzia avevo mitizzato’ (‘Discesa nella città eterna’). The reconsideration of these paternal myths becomes part of his coming to terms with the loss of his father. Understanding the politics of the past is inextricably linked to understanding and mourning his father.

There is both a personal and community function to Genna's investigation of history. *Medium* was first published online, available for free download with recordings of the author reading sections, and a no-profit printed version was also made available. Genna explains on his website that this decision was made in order to eliminate mediation between writer and reader, instead creating a closer relationship between them and making the text both personal and universal; he says of his eventual readers: ‘condivideranno il mio processo di elaborazione del lutto e la mia privata dialettica d’amore con l’altro: che è il mondo, e quindi anche il lettore, la comunità dei lettori’.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, as a result of this, he received messages from readers who wanted to share similar experiences with him (as Wu Ming 1 points out Wu Ming 2009a: 105). By making his mourning public, Genna wanted to connect with others over these issues. This is in keeping with the tendency in the New Italian Epic, discussed in the introduction to this study, to use autofiction as part of a sense of *impegno*: ‘usa introspezione e autofiction per narrare un fatto pubblico e “storico”’ (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 15n9). It is interesting that Genna connects dealing with his parental legacy to an idea of

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<sup>149</sup> Due to a lack of page numbers, I should specify that this quote comes from the ‘Magia rossa’ section. Further section references will be given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>150</sup> See <http://www.giugenna.com/wp-content/uploads/misc/mediumprogetto.html> (accessed 07.08.15).

communicating with 'l'altro'; for Recalcati, inheritance and paternity are inextricably linked to an idea of recognising an Other outside of the subject, rather than being closed in on the narcissistic self and separating oneself from responsibility in order to satisfy one's own caprices (2013a: 46-8). By attempting to transmit his experience to others and hear what they say, Genna's act can be seen, through the lens of Recalcati's theories, as one of responsibility in the world, connecting with those around him as they come to terms with their legacy together. Genna states in the book: 'Mio padre è *il* padre' ('Magia rossa'), implying a desire for universality. Although this is a deeply subjective account, he seeks through it to connect with a wider public about today's world and heredity.

It is no coincidence that Wu Ming 1 refers to Genna as playing the role of Telemachus when he goes to Berlin (2009b: 106). Recalcati refers to Telemachus' journey to gain knowledge of his father in the myth as an important part of his inheritance, as he actively chooses to seek him out: 'Cerca le tracce del padre, cerca notizie della sua vita' (2013a: 134). This is precisely what Genna does, embarking on a search that puts him at risk, but ultimately following these traces results in proper recognition of his father. As in the Homeric tale, proper acceptance and inheritance of his father's legacy can only be done after Telemachus' journey.<sup>151</sup> Genna is staging through fiction what Recalcati and Wu Ming 1 have spoken about this generation needing to do, that is go in search of their inheritance, as Bellu and Bajani also attempt to do.

Yet, despite the subtitle of the text being 'una storia vera', Genna chooses a highly fictional mode in order to do so. The first line states: 'Questo libro non è sincero', and the first few pages repeatedly tell the readers: 'Immaginate' (Ritrovamento'). Indeed, as the text

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<sup>151</sup> Jones' experience in the former Yugoslavia in *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* could be seen as a version of this journey too.

goes on, it descends into supernatural events and moves away from the more realist feel of its opening section. It transpires that the letter he found does not indicate that his father had a love affair in Germany, but alludes to visualisation experiments he undertook there with the Società Teosofica, involving a woman called Frau Hinze, who wrote the letter, and the real-life figure of the writer Peter Kolosimo.<sup>152</sup> We learn that these visualisation experiments were undertaken to look into the future, in order to ensure the survival of communism. In doing so, Genna's father foresaw not only his own death as it would actually happen, but also the end of the world in 2080 due to an asteroid hitting the Earth.<sup>153</sup> Wu Ming 1 has said of Genna's imaginings in *Medium*:

Descrivendo il padre come un veggente, Genna [...] lo omaggia per aver almeno immaginato un futuro, impresa che le ultime generazioni trovano molto difficile. In questo modo, Genna elabora il lutto e rende l'elaborazione importante per tutti noi.

[...] Una questione personale si è trasformata in meditazione sui destini della nostra specie, del nostro pianeta, del nostro cosmo (2009b: 108).

The community role of the text is certainly more complex than a simple sharing of the experience of grief after losing a parent, but rather provokes reflections through a psychic game of mirrors: this real, present event leads Giuseppe on an imaginary investigation into the past in which Vito saw both the past and future. The death of his father also coincides in the text with Giuseppe Genna expecting his own child with his girlfriend Federica, again combining past and future as legacies are explored and to be handed on. This is complicated

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<sup>152</sup> An Italian writer most prolific in the sixties and seventies, Kolosimo engaged in what has been called *fantarcheologia*, or *archeologia spaziale*: 'una fantascienza tesa a esplorare il remoto passato della Terra e a inventare spiegazioni legate all'esistenza di civiltà extraterrestri per le evidenze archeologiche lasciate dai popoli antichi' (Iannuzzi 2014: 107). Wu Ming themselves have written about Kolosimo's unusual conflation of science fiction and political reality (Wu Ming 2014a), which Genna's text comes to resemble as it goes on.

<sup>153</sup> I will return to ideas about apocalypse and their connection to paternity later in this chapter.

by the fact that Giuseppe witnesses himself communicating with his father from the future in one of the visualisation experiments. He then has the presentiment that his baby, which was probably conceived in a deeply Freudian moment of love making on the spot where his father's body was found, and which Federica eventually miscarries, was 'una nuova manifestazione di mio padre' ('Io'). Genna acts as the medium between these entangled times, just as Frau Hinze describes the subject of their visualisation experiments: 'Il soggetto sarà propriamente *medium*: un mezzo, un canale per la manifestazione fisica di un'entità del senzاتempo' ('L'osculatore'). In the same way, writers can move between time frames and invite reflections through their narratives, channelling reality and fiction.

*Italia De Profundis*, on the other hand, is firmly situated in the present, as mourning his father leads him to reflect on the problems both in his own life and in modern-day Italy. It moves between his hometown of Milan, Venice during the film festival and a tourist resort in Sicily. Genna tells us in the 'Ringraziamenti' at the end of the text that it could equally have been entitled "'Giuseppe Genna" *De Profundis*' (347), giving a sense of his autofictional, constructed self as both separate from him in its inverted commas and bound up with Italy which his name could replace. In Santoro's words, Genna superimposes himself onto an Italy that is 'malata, divorata da un male, un cancro in avanzata metastasi, come quello che divora il corpo vivo del padre e l'anima dello stesso autore' (2010: 36).

The text is less supernatural than *Medium* in approach, and this difference in tone is established from the description of the discovery of his father's body, which corresponds in many details with the description of the same event in *Medium*, but without strange phone calls and mysterious visitors. It instead focusses on practicalities, made up of brief fragments outlining the arrangements he made and the thoughts he had; as he states: 'Non c'è nulla di sovrannaturale' (27). However, that is not to say that this book is firmly rooted in reality or

indeed realism. Whilst it avoids experiments with time travel, we do encounter a psychic shaman and some distinctly Lynchian undertones, and indeed overtones when he thinks: ‘Pensai a vivere, a tutti gli effetti, una ripresa cinematografica firmata da David Lynch’ (191). Indeed, he then narrates his experience of seeing *Inland Empire* at the Venice Film Festival, where he also meets Lynch, whom he sees as ‘uno dei genii della nostra epoca’ (227). Interestingly Genna has also compared *Medium* to Lynch’s work,<sup>154</sup> and Lynch’s appearance in *Italia De Profundis* serves to invite parallels with this text too. In Genna’s conversation with Lynch, the American director says of his work that, despite examining various subjects, his gaze is inward (or inland): ‘È la postura interna: osservo me’ (222). Genna deeply admires *Inland Empire*, a strange web of stories loosely based around the theme of adultery, saying that its allegorical drive means that there is no plot (211), and his own text seems to mirror this approach: rather than a straightforward, easily decipherable story, there are variations on a theme, open to psychoanalytical interpretation, just as Žižek (2000) has read Lynch’s *Lost Highway*.<sup>155</sup>

Indeed, although Genna is offering his personal story, what is in front of us is another unidentified narrative object that is stylistically unusual, searching for forms to represent reality in a world in which, as Genna tells us repeatedly: ‘La parola sta cadendo. / L’immagine sta cadendo’ (55, and then in various forms on pages 78-9, 139, 153-4, 208). The loss of a father is linked to a loss of stability in understanding and representing the world. *Italia De Profundis* even comments on itself in postmodernist metafictional moments. One that particularly stands out is his warning to the reader:

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<sup>154</sup> See <http://www.giugenna.com/medium.html> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>155</sup> There are parallels to be drawn between the work of Recalcati and that of Žižek, who has also analysed recent culture from a Lacanian perspective and illustrated the more problematic elements of today’s capitalist world. Perhaps the inclusion of Lynch in *Italia De Profundis* can also be seen as another (unspoken) instance of Genna drawing on Wallace, who wrote about his experience on the set of *Lost Highway* in his essay ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, included in the collection I will refer to later, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1997).

## ATTENZIONE

Da questo punto, fino a pagina 91, tutto diventa noiosissimo. Al fine di evitare tale noia, si consiglia vivamente di saltare a pagina 92, dove non è neppure detto che non ci si annoi. Comunque, ciò che segue è più noioso di quanto sia umano immaginare e inoltre si tratta di una parte che abbassa le vendite del libro. Si raccomanda di saltarla a piè pari, davvero (73).

Santoro points out that we are faced with a *mis-en-abyme* of the self (2010:38), as Genna the textual protagonist's story is interrupted by an extra-diegetic Genna telling us what to do, but arguably also encouraging us not to do it. Do we read the more straightforward, linear and banal 'descrizione della "scena italiana"' (70), then skip ahead to the next step of the narrative, or do we embark on the stream of consciousness filled with abstract images that are open to the reader to interpret? As with his changing statements about the truth status of *Medium*, Genna seems to be asking what literature can do, highlighting its artificiality whilst considering political and ethical issues. His technique at this point is reminiscent of Julio Cortázar's experimental 1963 novel *Rayuela (Hopscotch)*, in which the readers are encouraged in the author's note at the beginning to find their own paths through the novel, possibly jumping over the 'Expendable Chapters' (Cortázar 1966: 351). This makes readers share the work of constructing the text, as the author tries to shake them out of passivity. The encouragement to participate in Genna's work is reinforced by its transmedial elements: as well as four book trailers, there is an 'ipertesto della "scena italiana come inferno"' on Genna's blog, where the reader can seek out further explanation and references that help to

unravel the obscurity of the section from page 73 to page 91 that Genna seemingly advises his readers to skip.<sup>156</sup>

Such elements suggest that, once again, Genna does not want to invite easy identification with his subject matter, but rather aims to encourage readerly work. This is also true of his earlier, highly unusual text *Dies irae* (2006), in which he interwove an autofictional investigation of the story of Alfredino Rampi with a science fiction narrative and various other microstories. In *Italia De Profundis*, Genna meets a man who tells him he loved *Dies irae*: ‘Alfredino, gli anni Ottanta, Moana Pozzi: io ricordo tutto. È andata veramente così’ (310). On hearing this, Genna now thinks the novel was ‘un mezzo fallimento’ (310), as the reader was not meant to identify with it and nostalgically share the memory of the eighties. Rather than the reader being simply a ‘spettatore’ (310), Genna’s fiction is supposed to shake up expectations, and this is precisely what we can see him trying to do in *Italia De Profundis* too. We can detect Wu Ming 1’s idea of the ‘algoritmo’, discussed in chapter one. Wu Ming 1 describes New Italian Epic texts as being like puzzles to be solved, or in this case at least to open up possible suggestions to help access a deeper message: ‘Ogni testo ha uno o più algoritmi, filza d’istruzioni da seguire lascamente, improvvisando, dall’orlo-superficie del testo fino al mitologema e ritorno. /Al lettore trovarli’ (2009a: 99). Each reader must construct his or her own interpretation when confronted with these strange stories, loosely following the clues to reach a possible understanding of what is being said, which, certainly in the case of Genna’s work, will never be spelled out by the author.

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<sup>156</sup> See <http://www.giugenna.com/2008/12/03/da-italia-de-profundis-ipertesto-della-scena-italiana-come-inferno> (accessed 07.08.15).

From the opening extract taken from *Petrolino* onwards, Genna also draws on Pasolini's work in order to experiment with form in *Italia De Profundis*. As discussed earlier, Pasolini has been a constant reference point for New Italian Epic writers, but, in Genna's text, Pasolini is relevant more in terms of narrative practice, rather than being a model he looks to emulate in his act of *impegno* as Saviano has, for example.<sup>157</sup> Patti rightly says of the epigraph: 'the quotation from *Petrolino* would seem to aim at developing a metaliterary discourse on writing and the problematic representation of reality' (2010: 87). In answer to Antonello's question about Pasolini's legacy – 'Cosa ci resta della sua eredità? Cosa dobbiamo farcene della sua lezione? Come recuperarla, se recuperarla è possibile?' (Antonello 2012: 100) – Genna's way of recuperating this inheritance here is by looking beyond the classical novel form and style as Pasolini did. This is an attempt to 'seize reality' as Pasolini put it in the quote Genna includes – 'io ho cercato di impadronirmi della realtà' (Pasolini 1992: 419) – although, like the texts analysed in chapter five, this does not imply a mimetic, realist approach. Rather, as Patti states, Genna draws on the Pasolinian concept of writing 'in an experimental, unpredictable and undetermined way' (2010: 88). Through the fragmentary quality of his narrative, the gaps, the metaliterary discourse and the extra material online, Genna experiments with form and leaves the text, as Pasolini did *Petrolino*, as 'an open puzzle yet to be completed' (Patti 2010: 93).<sup>158</sup>

*Italia De Profundis* is rich with intertextual connections beyond Pasolini and Lynch, which further develop Genna's desire for a type of narrative that is innovative and requires his readers' participation. By directly invoking his literary precursors to address today's world, Genna looks back in order to look forward, and also explicitly places his work within a transnational framework, further demonstrating the way in which the New Italian Epic is

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<sup>157</sup> This will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.

<sup>158</sup> See Patti's essay (2010) for a detailed and effective analysis of precisely how Genna draws on Pasolini and *Petrolino*.



not limited to within Italy's borders, as I have discussed in earlier chapters. Genna points out that his description of the tourist resort also owes a textual debt to Houellebecq's *Plateforme* (340), although he also says of the French writer: 'mi sento distante dalla sua perenne inclinazione depressiva' (321). Despite this dismissal, *Plateforme*, opening with the death of the character Michel's father and going on to explore modern issues, and in particular those related to sexual relationships and desire, against the backdrop of modern tourism, is an important reference point for Genna's text. Houellebecq's resort in Pattaya is destroyed by a terrorist bomb at the end of *Plateforme*, whilst Genna's makes his Sicilian resort go up in flames, as both texts seem to be sending out warnings about the dangers of the mindless enjoyment they explore. Genna also refers to Burroughs several times, and his influence is evident in the fragmentary nature of the text resembling a cut-up, as well as in one of the vividly depicted 'Quattro storie di merda che non ricordo più' (113) in which Genna takes heroine. Eliot's *Wasteland* is mentioned alongside Burroughs in a list of literary precursors (72), and the text comes to a close with a quotation from that poem, the same extract that concludes the main body of Wu Ming 1's Memorandum, thus Genna makes a clear connection between his work and the New Italian Epic phenomenon.<sup>159</sup> It is worth pointing out that this extremely diverse list of literary precursors/progenitors provided by Genna – which also includes Leopardi and Celan alongside Pasolini, Burroughs and Eliot – is completely male, again leaning towards 'fathers' rather than 'mothers'. Genna tells us that all of them were chosen because they make the reader work; they are characterised by 'attività di autoconsapevolezza' (72). We must reflect on what is being put in front of us, which, like *Medium*, may initially appear to be autobiographical, but is something more experimental and thought provoking in the vein of his range of literary references.

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<sup>159</sup> He also mentions Wu Ming 1's 'Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori' when discussing Wallace's death (324).

Genna seems to be discouraging us from being like the shallow ‘neoitaliani’ that he encounters in the tourist resort in Sicily, ‘Questo corpo immenso che non si autopercepisce’ (300). These people are the epitome of Recalcati’s vision of the more problematic parts of today’s capitalist world, endlessly consuming and searching for pleasure, but unable to access true desire. The narrator tells us: ‘Parlano solo di cose, di soldi. E di sesso, di prestazioni sessuali, di storie tra amanti – e invece cercano l’amore’ (304). He is among this crowd and one of them, as we all are: ‘Io so che sono io e che sono loro. Siamo tutti’ (323). We see him dealing with his own problems with relationships and desire, as shown most patently by one of the ‘quattro storie di merda’ in which he has sex with three drag queens. Like the episode in which he takes heroine, he seems to be experimenting with his more transgressive compulsions, which are connected to his malaise in this modern world. The scene recalls Recalcati’s descriptions of empty enjoyment in which sex is used ‘come un puro anestetico per ridurre il dolore di esistere’ (2013a: 81). In a country portrayed as dominated by television and mobile phones, with declining literary and cinematic culture, ‘una nazione intera messa all’incanto, non incantata’ (43), the narrator’s existential angst plays itself out through these extreme experiences related to desire, whether sexual desire, the desire for drugs, or the desire to die in the euthanasia sequence. They are part of his self-discovery and of his exploration of national issues; as he narrates his country he also asks himself: ‘Cosa vuoi autenticamente? /Cosa desideri autenticamente?’ (250).

It is his stay in the tourist resort that brings to the fore perhaps the most important element in the dense intertextuality of *Italia De Profundis*, that is David Foster Wallace, who is also important in the New Italian Epic conception of the death of the father, as we have seen. However, I would argue that there is a certain misunderstanding of Wallace’s work in *Italia De Profundis* that is representative of a wider misunderstanding of postmodernism and irony. In the tourist resort, Genna likens himself to Wallace in the American writer’s essay

about his experience of a cruise holiday, ‘A supposedly fun thing I’ll never do again’. Genna says that, like Wallace, he is ‘davanti allo tsunami di questa surrealtà che è la massa occidentale, mercantilizzata’ (321). However, he also argues that Wallace was wrong to observe the cruise ship passengers with irony and amusement, from a distance that Genna is unable to achieve (322-3). He claims that Wallace can engage in sterile theorising about ‘il superamento del postmoderno’ (322), but Genna instead waits for the tragic culmination of the barrenness he observes. In a lengthy footnote worthy of Wallace’s style, Genna describes the American writer’s death, calling it ‘un gesto fondativo – probabilmente il più fondativo della mia generazione letteraria’ (324), although he is unable to explain why it happened. Genna’s digression on Wallace’s death is followed in the narrative by the discovery of the unknown man who died in his room in the tourist village. Significantly, he is found by Genna ‘[nella] stessa posizione del cadavere di mio padre’ (330); this indicates that, like Wallace’s body or his father’s, the discovery will lead to some kind of deeper knowledge or interrogation of beliefs. Nobody had noticed this single man, alone, and, after his death, they want to simply continue enjoying their holiday. It is as if his death is an intimation of something they want to ignore; it is described as ‘[lo] spettro di Banquo’ (334). A possible interpretation of this is that we need to connect with others, that detachment through intellectual endeavour or social invisibility will ultimately lead to tragedy. Boscolo argues that Genna is implicitly suggesting that the pain that led to Wallace’s suicide ‘derived from the awareness that he was no longer able to distinguish between himself and the masses he described with irony and detachment’ (2010b: 23). She goes on to say that, in the light of today’s global conflicts and environmental disasters: ‘Irony and detachment are [...] no longer acceptable means of representing society, in that everyone, including authors and narrators, is part of the society that is depicted. The chosen few who can look down on the behaviour of the masses no longer exist’ (2010b: 23-4).

However, Wallace was not simply the superior writer looking down on his subjects. Whilst there are laugh-out-loud moments in Wallace's essay, poking fun at some of the cruise ship passengers he observes,<sup>160</sup> his irony is not synonymous with detachment. He is not, as Genna believes, 'uno stronzo implicito' (325), but has a deeply serious message to communicate about the nature of consumption in today's world, in which people pay vast amounts of money to return to a child-like state of being 'pampered', watched over by staff who 'keep reassuring everybody that everybody's having a good time' (Wallace 1998: 260), all in an attempt to 'triumph over [...] death and decay' (Wallace 1998: 264). As with Genna's holiday village, or Houellebecq's, there are strong psychoanalytical undertones about the nature of pleasure and enjoyment today in Wallace's essay. Rather than simply inhabiting a position of detached distance from the experience, Wallace finds himself depressed by it: 'There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad [...] on board the *Nadir* – especially at night, when all the ship's structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased – I felt despair' (1998: 261). Even if Wallace himself said that 'Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving' (McCaffrey 1993: 147), the irony we see in 'A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again' can be seen as a form of attachment or responsibility, rather than of detachment or distancing. Moreover, I would argue that such irony, and even humour, are not absent from Genna's texts, which play with his readers' expectations and with the blurred lines between reality and fiction, between Genna the author and Genna the fictional character, to make serious points about today's world.

Di Martino rightly states that 'attempts to deny the existence of a continuity between postmodernism and contemporary literature are often due to the misconception that postmodernist irony is associated only with a poetics of relativism and self-referentiality, and

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<sup>160</sup> 'I have seen a toupee on a thirteen-year-old boy [...] I've seen fluorescent luggage and fluorescent sunglasses and fluorescent pince-nez and over twenty different makes of rubber thong. I have [...] watched a woman in silver lamé projectile-vomit inside a glass elevator' (Wallace 1998: 257).

does not carry a message of solidarity that promotes social commitment' (2011: 137). In arguing that there is continuity in the ethical use of irony from Pirandello to Gadda to Eco and finally to the New Italian Epic, Di Martino draws on both Hutcheon's work on postmodern irony as a 'complicitous critique' of reality (Hutcheon 1989: 3) and Burns' argument in *Fragments of Impegno*, in which the writers she analyses are described as employing both 'a superficial, sparky sort of irony', but also 'a much weightier, more cogent and even cruel irony, which exposes the "dark side" of contemporary life and asks the reader to recognise it [...] This is an irony which intends to make a point, and a very sharp point' (Burns 2001: 183).<sup>161</sup> Interestingly, Burns also suggests that, although such a use of irony is a tradition of European literature, it can also be seen as specifically Italian - 'running from as far back as Dante, through Ariosto, Leopardi, Verga, Svevo, to Pavese and Calvino, who forefronts the seriousness of games' (2001: 183) – and Di Martino makes a similar argument for this Italian tradition of irony. It is no coincidence, then, that we see it also being employed by many of the New Italian Epic writers, despite Wu Ming 1's belief put forward in the Memorandum that postmodernist irony is 'cool-and-dry' (2009a: 22). There is an emotional engagement that can be detected, which I will return to in chapter five when discussing other autofictional narratives in the New Italian Epic corpus. Here we have seen that the loss of Genna's father seems to trigger a search for new affective connections in texts that, despite

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<sup>161</sup> Genna (and also Wallace) could arguably be seen as inhabiting the position that Burns describes in relation to Tondelli in his work, that of 'being at once present and absent, inside and outside [...] It is the condition of the observer, detaching himself from the scene to attain a perspective which allows thorough examination of that scene, so generating a cognitive or emotional participation' (2001: 117). Tondelli must be an unspoken reference for Genna, not only through this positioning, but also in his exploration of desire and transgressive behaviour in order to indirectly comment on contemporary societal issues, as well as his frequent presence in his texts - Burns states that Tondelli is 'author and character at once, in and out of the text' (2001: 118) - although his presence is certainly not as overt as Genna's. Genna's *Italia De Profundis* particularly echoes Tondelli's *Rimini*, which similarly explored the empty enjoyment of holiday-making and the pain of thwarted desires through a series of fragments loosely bound together, reflecting himself in the character of Bruno May. Like Tondelli, Genna tries to connect with his readers in *Italia De Profundis*, as in *Medium*, sharing his experiences whilst engaging in the work of fiction.

their use of irony, supernatural elements and heavy fictionalising, have a very real sense of social responsibility.

### ***Nelle mani giuste* by Giancarlo De Cataldo**

De Cataldo's *Nelle mani giuste* (2007) contains certain crossovers with Genna's work in its enquiry into the past and reflections on the present through ideas connected to paternity and responsibility through literature, but takes the theme of the death of the father in a different direction. It is the sequel to his hugely successful 2002 text *Romanzo criminale*, which depicted the true story of the Banda della Magliana, and was subsequently made into an acclaimed film directed by Michele Placido and a Sky television series. Like Genna's *Medium*, *Romanzo criminale* and *Nelle mani giuste*, as well as De Cataldo's Risorgimento novel *I traditori*, centre on an investigation into the past, examining traces to explain how we arrived at the present situation, and in all three of De Cataldo's texts this relates to the Mafia phenomenon and its links with the state. Some of the characters of *Romanzo criminale* reprise their roles in *Nelle mani giuste*, such as Scialoja, the police officer who investigated the Magliana gang before becoming disillusioned, or Patrizia, the sex worker he falls in love with, but the sequel has a distinct approach and tone compared to the original, and this is strongly tied up with ideas related to the theme of 'la morte del Vecchio'.

Where *Romanzo criminale* was a sprawling history of the gang, spanning the years from 1977 to 1992, *Nelle mani giuste* maintains a tight focus on the period between autumn 1992 and December 1993, not coincidentally addressing the year that has been seen by Wu Ming 1 to be the starting point of the New Italian Epic phenomenon, but also the missed opportunity for revolutionary change. This is the watershed moment of the changeover

between the First and Second Republic, the Tangentopoli scandals and the rise of Berlusconi, and De Cataldo frequently refers to it in terms of a paradigm shift, alternatively ‘il crepuscolo degli dèi’ (186), or ‘una Nuova Alba Italiana’ (195). Within the fictional world of the text, it also signals the death of the character ‘il Vecchio’, who had been controlling the country from behind the scenes: mediating between state and Mafia, overseeing the ‘strategia della tensione’ and creating the Catena, a secret organisation behind the real-life hidden network known as the Gladio. ‘Il Vecchio’ also stored a huge number of documents containing state secrets, reminiscent of Andreotti’s secret archive, which has been labelled ‘[il] “grande armadio” della Prima repubblica’ and remains out of reach for the public (Cucchiarelli 2013). Scialoja, one of the many ‘orfani del Vecchio’ (19), receives this extensive store of documents as his successor, and is left to negotiate a difficult legacy, as, once more, the end of an era coincides with the death of a patriarch, and a search for a new way forward.

Scialoja battles with a sense of inadequacy in the face of his inheritance, as he feels unable to fill the shoes of ‘il Vecchio’. Despite having come a long way from the police officer of *Romanzo criminale* – ‘Nella sua vita precedente, quand’era un semplice sbirro infarcito di ideali’ (38) – and learnt about the mechanisms of power, in a familiar story arc charting the loss of ideals and acceptance of corruption, he makes mistakes or fails to fully understand his new position. He questions why he was chosen as successor, telling himself: ‘non sei il Vecchio! Non sei lui, e non sei nemmeno come lui’ (106). The death of this father figure is linked to a need to step up and assume new responsibilities, although there are no familial ties here, and, over the course of the book, it becomes clear that the patriarch wished to toy with Scialoja and maintain power even from beyond the grave, deliberately creating a rivalry with Stalin Rossetti, the head of the Catena, who feels he is the rightful heir. There was no neat passing on of the inheritance of ‘il Vecchio’, but rather a desire to create fraternal infighting and maintain chaos as his legacy. Neither is Scialoja’s inheritance something to be

desired, but rather a cross to bear as he struggles with his own authority and legitimacy against the backdrop of Berlusconi coming to power and, towards the end of the narrative, the various bomb attacks around Italy at that time, connected to Cosa Nostra. This is one of the epic, threshold moments discussed in chapter one.

Generational issues are present in the text in the many different facets of society depicted in *Nelle mani giuste*, not simply in the figure of ‘il Vecchio’ in politics. De Cataldo introduces the already deceased character of ‘il Fondatore’, who represents the capitalist patriarch, head of a successful business, the control of which has now been passed down to the next generation. ‘Il Fondatore’ is remembered by his daughter Maya as controlling and authoritative; she desired an affectionate and normal father: ‘Non grande, non invidiato, non terribile come Giove in terra. Non come quel Fondatore’ (247). Outside of the law, Cosa Nostra is portrayed as following a similar power structure. It is wrestling with the now absent father figure of Totò Riina, with a nostalgia for a glorious past and with its younger members pushing back against their elders. Zu’ Cosimo – who bears a strong resemblance to Bernardo Provenzano, the real-life Mafia Godfather – tells the boss of the new guard: ‘è cosa triste, Angelino, quando i giovani voltano le spalle ai vecchi’ (188). Every aspect of De Cataldo’s world is dealing with authority and generational problems.

*Nelle mani giuste* is described by Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum as ‘un esperimento di prosa poetica’ (2009a: 12), and, certainly, De Cataldo’s use of language when exploring this key point in time draws attention. Aside from the strongly oral quality that is present in many New Italian Epic texts, expressing the varieties of spoken Italian, such as the Sicilian background of characters like zu’ Cosimo – “‘Mangia, mangia, figghiu’ (11) – or the cadences of Rome – “‘Scusame si nun m’arzo, ma ’sta chemio è proprio ’na brutta cojonella!’” (107) – De Cataldo frequently employs rhetorical and poetic effects. The first



time the reader comes up against this is near the beginning, when the narrator elucidates what can be seen as a sort of ‘A to Z’ of Italian culture and society, accumulating an alliterative list from ‘Artigiani, assassini, architetti, antifascisti, anticomunisti, artisti’ to ‘Zoccole zinnute, zazzeruti zanni, zoppicanti zoroastriani’ (35). Elsewhere in the text, the use of rhetorical questions and anaphora is widespread. To give one of many of examples: ‘Stalin Rossetti trafficava con la sacra corona unita. /Stalin Rossetti trafficava con i serbi. /Stalin Rossetti trafficava con gli albanesi’, and so it continues (92-3). This gives the text a certain vibrancy and liveliness that Wu Ming 1 would align with epic qualities, and it also foregrounds language and how it is being used. As Genna self-consciously instructs his readers how to approach his text in *Italia De Profundis*, De Cataldo seems to want to direct our focus towards his own storytelling, rather than simply drawing the reader into a verisimilar world.

Within such playing on words, the text’s title resonates in various ways. The ‘mani giuste’ of course recall the ‘mani pulite’ of the judicial investigations of the time. They also imply Scialoja’s hands into which ‘il Vecchio’’s power and archive of documents have been placed: ‘Che immensa fonte di potere, nelle mani giuste’ (332). The ‘right hands’ also suggest the inverse, the ‘wrong hands’, which is arguably the sensation given to the reader when senator Argenti reflects towards the end of the text, on the eve of Berlusconi’s election win: ‘La Storia avrebbe consegnato l’Italia nelle mani giuste’ (295). Despite Argenti’s assertion, there is a strong sense that in 1993 something did not change hands correctly. Yet, there is also a certain amount of ambiguity as to whether the situation can be corrected, as shown by the repetition of ideas about change: ‘le cose cambiano’ (89, 90, 91), ‘Ma le cose possono mai cambiare?’ (162), ‘le cose cambieranno’ (273, 274), ‘Cambieranno?’ (273). In the epilogue, when Stalin Rossetti, head of the Catena, becomes the new successor of ‘il Vecchio’, he reflects: ‘Le cose tornavano al loro posto’ (331). This recalls the idea famously expressed in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s historical novel *Il gattopardo*: ‘Se vogliamo

che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi' (1969: 41).<sup>162</sup> Perhaps the right hands are simply the hands that have always held the power.

Nevertheless, De Cataldo has Stalin killed almost immediately after he gets his hands on the inheritance, and the secret archive is burnt down, like Genna's tourist resort in *Italia De Profundis*. By burning these secrets, and having Scialoja disappear without trace – 'Nessuno sa che fine abbia fatto' (336) – De Cataldo leaves the text open as to what remains of the father figure, and of Italy's shadowy recent past. As in Genna's text, razing this fictional space to the ground arguably leaves a sense of possibility regarding both their inheritance and the future. In the final pages, just after Stalin Rossetti's death, the narrator poses the question: 'Ma esistevano mani giuste?' (332). The text resists a sense of closure, leaving open questions about paternity and succession. This can be compared to Stendhal's approach in *Le Rouge et le noir*, whose narrative, after a postponed conclusion, abruptly ends with the guillotine. Brooks says of the text:

*Le Rouge et le noir* solicits our attention and frustrates our expectation because we have some sense of the fitting biographical pattern: one in which sons inherit from fathers and pass on [...] a wisdom gained, a point of understanding attained.

Stendhal's perversity may make us realize that such a patterning is both necessary and suspect, the product of an interpretation motivated by desire (1984: 89).

De Cataldo and Genna similarly destabilise their readers' desire for closure, or for a straightforward story about the loss of a father figure, instead posing questions about inheritance and responsibility. The ending of *Nelle mani giuste* could be seen as part of a desire to question that 'natural' order of things in Italy, as the new inheritor Stalin is

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<sup>162</sup> This comparison seems particularly relevant in that *Il gattopardo* addresses another failed revolution and foundational moment of the Italian state, the Risorgimento, which is also represented in the New Italian Epic historical novels that I discuss in chapter four.

immediately killed, and the former inheritor disappears, and even what they were to inherit goes up in flames. In Recalcati's terms, De Cataldo, like Genna (or Stendhal), would seem to be calling on this generation to re-conquer their inheritance through this frustration of expectation.

The fires that close both Genna's *Italia De Profundis* and De Cataldo's *Nelle mani giuste*, and the fact that Genna's father in *Medium* foresees the end of the world, suggest that apocalyptic visions are not far from these writers' minds when exploring the theme of 'la morte del Vecchio'. Kermode has argued that the ways in which narratives construct endings illustrate anxieties about their authors' own times and worldview: 'The apocalyptic types – empire, decadence and renovation, progress and catastrophe – are fed by history and underlie our ways of making sense of the world from where we stand, in the midst' (2000: 29). Kermode's wording here very much recalls the quote from Brooks in the introduction to this chapter about 'the conflict of movement and resistance, revolution and restoration' (1984: 65). Apocalypse and paternity are certainly not completely divorced from one another as narrative concerns. They both intertwine questions of endings and beginnings, as seen, for example, in what Mussgnug has described as 'last man fictions' (2012: 333), in which the protagonist has responsibility for the continuation of the species. Whilst De Cataldo is not engaging with the literal apocalypse that we glimpse in Genna's *Medium*, the flames within the narrative and extra-diegetically gracing the front cover of *Nelle mani giuste* give a sense, once again, that this is a watershed moment, and an attempt to make sense of the world.

Giglioli, however, sees De Cataldo's work in terms of a renunciation of responsibility. He takes issue with the figure of the *Grande Vecchio*, the puppet master controlling events from behind the scenes that appears in De Cataldo's texts and others, such as the eponymous protagonist of Luther Blissett's *Q*. For Giglioli, the need for such a figure springs from

anxieties about agency in the modern age, the result of a godless universe where texts no longer have a Manzonian idea of Providence to give meaning to events.<sup>163</sup> He states: ‘Se la realtà è divenuta inappropriabile, ci si lasci almeno la libertà di fantasticare che qualcuno, da qualche parte, benevolo o malevolo che sia, riscatti con la sua mano che stringe tutti i fili il nostro pugno vuoto’ (2011: 45). In the choice of the New Italian Epic writers to fictionalise about history in this way, Giglioli detects ‘[un] forte impulso risarcitorio’ (2011: 47), which supposedly demonstrates their desire to justify the failures of the present through their historical novels, and, in doing so, underline both our impotence and lack of culpability in today’s fatherless world.

However, it is arguable whether De Cataldo is offering us reassurance of any kind through his fictionalising in *Nelle mani giuste*. He has said that he specifically conceived of the character of ‘il Vecchio’ in order to provide a god-like figure who was ‘il principio del caos’ as opposed to ‘la divina provvidenza di stampo manzoniano’ (Antonello and O’Leary 2009: 355). As described above, there is not a neatness to his legacy, neither is there a clear order in his approach to politics, in which he seemed to simply pursue power for power’s sake. When asked whether ‘il Vecchio’ is a communist, Stalin Rossetti replies: ‘Il Vecchio è il Vecchio e basta’ (145). By adding the Catena behind the real-life Gladio network, De Cataldo multiplies the levels of secrecy and conspiracy of his fictional world, giving a strong sense that there may be no centre to these manifold layers, no transcendental organisational principle to the chaotic entanglements of Mafia and state. Yet this does not signal Giglioli’s ‘forte impulso risarcitorio’ (2011: 47); rather, De Cataldo is negotiating the holes in public knowledge about what happened in the early nineties, and indeed earlier in the case of

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<sup>163</sup> For Brooks, such anxieties were already present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century novels he analyses: ‘The enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story take on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world’ (1992: 6).

*Romanzo criminale*. By narrating conspiracies and inventing a fantastical and omnipotent patriarch, he is inserting his fiction into the gaps of history. In an interview, De Cataldo linked his approach precisely to that of Manzoni in *I promessi sposi* and ‘Storia della colonna infame’ in the ways Manzoni negotiated between ‘vero’ and ‘verosimile’ (Antonello and O’Leary 2009: 358). This is particularly interesting in reference to the discussion of the New Italian Epic historical novels that I address in the next chapter, tracing the approach of these writers back to the ‘father’ of the modern Italian historical novel. Like Manzoni, De Cataldo’s allegorical approach to his subject matter helps to shed light on the present. We are not supposed to take his ‘solutions’ to the unsolved mysteries of the recent past at face value, or see them as replacing a Manzonian providence. Like Genna’s *Medium*, this is a flight of the imagination, yet one that has a bearing on reality.

Moreover, whilst Giglioli may refer to writers like De Cataldo writing ‘affabulazioni paranoiche’ (2011: 29), the use of conspiracy theories is entirely appropriate in reference to Italy’s recent past. The Bologna bombing and Moro’s death that are addressed in *Romanzo criminale* are just two well-known examples of the many *misteri d’Italia* that continue to unfold, as shown by the ongoing revelations of the investigation into the Moro kidnapping.<sup>164</sup> The ‘Mafia Capitale’<sup>165</sup> scandals that were uncovered in 2014 demonstrate that De Cataldo’s portrayals of the links between organised crime and state officials in Rome are not very far removed from the reality. De Michele places De Cataldo’s text among others that are attempting to ‘dire l’indicibile nel paese dei misteri’ (2008a). De Cataldo has justifiably stated: ‘Io credo che i complotti esistano’ (Antonello and O’Leary 2009: 354), and his

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<sup>164</sup>For example, there have revelations surrounding the role of the American **Steve Piczenik** in Moro’s kidnapping and death (see Bianconi 2014).

<sup>165</sup> This was the name given by magistrates to the vast network of organised crime that was uncovered in Rome. A journalist for *La Repubblica* described it as follows: ‘Strutturata come una piovra che asfissia la città. Ogni uomo ha un compito, ogni compito ha un prezzo. Appalti, usura, estorsioni, corruzione. Dentro il Comune di Roma, nelle istituzioni, nelle cooperative’ (Tonacci 2014).

mention of the failed conspiracy of Watergate adds another compelling example beyond Italy's borders showing the narration of conspiracies to be a plot that is not paranoid or completely beyond the realms of possibility. Genna said of De Cataldo in a review of *Nelle mani giuste*: 'affronta il soggetto più difficile, imprevedibile e scivoloso che uno scrittore italiano possa mettersi in testa di romanzare – cioè il passaggio post-Muro e la stagione delle bombe agli Uffizi, al PAC di Milano, alle chiese di Roma, oltre che l'attentato a Costanzo, nel '93 [...] un periodo circa il quale non si è confortati da nulla, da nessuna opera di riflessione e ricomposizione' (Genna 2007b). By re-imagining events in *Nelle mani giuste* such as the Via dei Georgofili Massacre, De Cataldo helps Italy begin to confront a traumatic recent past that had been previously overlooked by writers.

De Cataldo tells us in the 'Avvertenza per il lettore' at the beginning of the book that he does not betray history, but rather interprets it by representing 'eventi reali sotto il segno della Metafora' (2). From a psychoanalytical angle, the word metaphor, eye-catchingly capitalised, recalls Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, or Lacan's thesis that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (quoted in Evans 1996: 97). The choice of word can thus be read as another conscious or unconscious signal that we are addressing a repressed and unresolved conflict through this narrative. Like Genna's fictionalising around his father's death in *Medium*, De Cataldo seems to be playing out his (and his readers') wish to deal with something that resists being dealt with in a straightforward way, due to a lack of knowledge about or understanding of the past. In an interview about *Romanzo criminale*, he said that addressing such conflictual issues through literature is a writer's duty: 'Estrarre dai fatti una linea metaforica e mitologica e puntare al cuore di una falsa storia: per ciò stesso più vera, e comunque più convincente, di quella "ufficiale"' (D'Attis). Another repetition compulsion that can be detected in the New Italian Epic aside from 'la morte del Vecchio' is precisely this belief that a literary version of events is somehow superior to an empirically

verifiable one, that, in the absence of concrete evidence, these writers can access a deeper truth, or at least one that rings truer than the official version, in the tradition of Italian writers like Sciascia or Pasolini.<sup>166</sup> By doing so, they can process their difficult and incomplete legacy even without the proof.

Giglioli does rightly mention the influence of writers like Philip K. Dick on such re-imaginings of history (2011: 29) – or ‘ucronie’ as Wu Ming 1 calls them in the Memorandum (2009a: 34) – but Dick was similarly not disengaging with present reality and political and ethical issues by resorting to alternative history fiction. In his 1962 novel, *The Man in the High Castle*, the American writer imagined that the Axis Powers – Japan, Italy and Germany – had won the Second World War, and his story takes place in an occupied area of America in 1962. The man of the title, Hawthorne Abendsen, has written his own alternative history in which the Axis Powers had been defeated, and his novel is banned under the authoritarian regime. One of the main protagonists, Juliana Frink, reflects about Abendsen: ‘He told us about our own world [...] This, what’s around us now [...] He wants us to see it for what it is’ (2009: 238-9). This text-within-the-text is seen both as dangerous and as commenting on reality despite its fictionality, and Dick, despite perhaps being dismissed by some as ‘only’ a science fiction writer, is saying through this *mis-en-abyme* something about the nature of the America in which he was writing, a country in political turmoil exercising imperialism in an attempt to quell the ‘dangers’ of Communism, just as within the story the Axis Powers fear dissent against their totalitarian rule.

Fictionalising about real-life events, as Genna and De Cataldo do too, does not signal a desire to escape reality by finding an easy answer to difficult questions. Rather than being

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<sup>166</sup> As I discussed in chapter one. This can be seen in the approach of New Italian Epic writers to history, as I analyse in the next chapter, or to current events in a journalistic mode, as analysed in chapter five.

an abdication of responsibility, it can be seen as intrinsically part of a need to take responsibility, and, in the case of the New Italian Epic, of a need to deal with ‘la morte del Vecchio’ by any means possible. As Genna said in a review, De Cataldo was one of the first writers to truly address the period following the end of the Cold War: ‘è il primo intellettuale e narratore a compiere il gesto: gli anni Novanta entrano nella letteratura. Questo è l’inizio di un metabolismo’ (2007b). With a continuing lack of proof, how can the gaps of the past be bridged if not through fictionalising, and how can this generation begin to digest what happened? To return to Recalcati, De Cataldo’s way of neither rejecting the past, nor addressing it nostalgically and uncritically, is precisely what this generation needs to do; he is putting into practice what Recalcati describes as ‘un movimento in avanti, di riconquista’ (2013a: 135).

Brooks states that at the root of the obsession with paternity in Stendhal’s work is a fundamental question: ‘To whom does France belong?’ (1984: 62). After a closer analysis of these recent Italian writers’ portrayal of patricide and generational conflict, we can find the question: To whom does Italy belong? Genna’s two texts reacting to his father’s death, and De Cataldo’s *Nelle mani giuste*, search for ways to consider this question, to bring to light the failings of the past and present, and to consider other possibilities in the future, as shown by their dabbling with apocalypse. They explore how we can relate to a personal and collective past through addressing both real and symbolic father figures, and they ask what literature can do, whilst almost creating a canon for today’s writers of literary ‘fathers’ from Italy and beyond, like Wallace, Pasolini and Dick, whose inheritance can also help to find a way forward in the current political and cultural climate. The unusual configurations of fact and fiction in the texts seen in this chapter – Genna’s autofiction and De Cataldo’s engagement with



conspiracy theories – also suggest that fatherhood and legitimacy are not simply biological or social questions, but also textual questions: where did this text come from, what legitimises it? These are imaginative, creative approaches to understanding our inheritance through literature.

However, these writers are examining these questions from a clear position of white, male, Italian-national centrality. In the texts that deal with the theme of orphanhood, a direct paternal inheritance seems to be being investigated but not fundamentally challenged. This begs the question: to whom else does Italy belong? The *sguardo obliquo* should ideally provide an alternative to a dominant white, male viewpoint that is still found in many New Italian Epic texts, moving beyond discussions exclusively centred on fathers and sons and a national standpoint, instead embracing other points of view.

Perhaps the New Italian Epic text that most successfully considers questions of inheritance from an oblique viewpoint is Laura Pugno's *Sirene* (2007),<sup>167</sup> which imagines a future dystopia in which the human population has been decimated by skin cancer and parts of the Earth submerged under water. Mermaids have been discovered, but the females, which are most valued, are exploited for their meat and as sexual objects. The main protagonist, Samuel, impregnates a mermaid, who gives birth to a human-mermaid hybrid called Mia. Towards the end of the narrative, he realises that the resistance of the mermaids to skin cancer may be the salvation of humans: 'Il dna di sirena era forse la cura. I corpi della nuova specie di ibridi, miscelata al giusto grado di homo sapiens, sarebbero stati immune?' (2007: 138). Yet, at the end, Mia escapes captivity and swims off into the ocean: 'Non sapeva neanche dove si trovasse, lei e il suo branco, sulle mappe degli esseri umani' (2007: 145).

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<sup>167</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction to this study, questions have been raised over whether it is really part of the corpus, although I see the reasons for this as weak, particularly in light of my argument here for a need for different perspectives.

The novel reflects on questions of responsibility for the planet's future through this story of inheritance and impending apocalypse. As Fulginiti states: 'Matricide and earthicide clearly overlap in the environmental dystopia in *Sirens*, whose plot is marked by metaphors of maternal fluids (blood, milk, and water), by a succession of female generations, and by violence against bodies gendered female' (2014: 163). Pugno's narrative very decisively calls into question a male-centric and, indeed, anthropocentric viewpoint. *Sirene* also seems to invite comparisons with Rosi Braidotti's work on the productive potential of thinking through non-dominant perspectives, and of seeing the posthuman condition 'as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who or what we are actually in the process of becoming' (Braidotti 2013: 12).<sup>168</sup> Wu Ming 1 hints at the need for such perspectives in the Memorandum, when he argues that, in the light of imminent disasters of different kinds, the oblique gaze of the New Italian Epic can help to consider other points of view: 'è tanto importante la questione del punto di vista obliquo, e diverrà sempre più importante – come aveva intuito Calvino – la "resa" letteraria di sguardi extra-umani, non-umani, non-identificabili. Questi esperimenti ci aiutano a uscire da noi stessi' (2009a: 58). This is a particularly interesting proposition by Wu Ming 1, but one that finds limited responses in the nebula.

Although Mia's escape at the end of *Sirene* could be read as fully apocalyptic (as it has by Rushing 2011: 15), I believe the sense of openness encapsulated in the final line could suggest otherwise: 'La mente di Mia era tabula rasa' (2007: 145). The future too seems to be a blank slate, and narratives such as Pugno's can alert us – like the alternative meaning of the sirens in the novel's title – to the damaging effects of our behaviour in the present in an

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<sup>168</sup> Fulginiti also draws parallels with Braidotti's work on monstrosity in her 2002 text *Metamorphoses* and the ways it can challenge the dominant white, male, able-bodied perspective (Fulginiti 2014: 162-3).

attempt to have an impact on the future. In the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 states: ‘Oggi arte e letteratura non possono limitarsi a suonare allarmi tardivi: devono aiutarci a immaginare vie d’uscita’ (2009a: 60). Yet, an insistence on patricide in the New Italian Epic in order to drive forward cultural change could be seen as sounding belated alarms, or at least as a limited way of addressing the current situation, despite the interesting and experimental approaches to narrative that we have seen in the writers analysed in this chapter, whose focus on the theme of ‘la morte del Vecchio’ begins to metabolise the difficult recent past. Moving away from simply questions of paternity and from male – or indeed human – viewpoints can help to address some of the more urgent questions in the present through new perspectives, as part of an enlarged community. As Godani states: ‘non è più tempo di re, *non è più tempo di padri*’ (2014: 20).

## ~ CHAPTER FOUR ~

### On the New Italian Epic Historical Novels

In 1992, around the same time as the beginnings of the New Italian Epic phenomenon, Fukuyama famously claimed that we were reaching the end of history. Subsequent momentous historical events, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, clearly undermined the post-Cold War optimism of Fukuyama's statement. Since then, there have also been substantial developments in the study of history, related to the growth in importance of cultural memory studies, as well as to a renewed interest from novelists in history, as seen in the huge popularity of historical fiction in the new millennium. Anderson states: 'Today, the historical novel has become, at the upper ranges of fiction, more widespread than it was even at the height of its classical period in the early 19th century' (2011). Just glancing at the winners of literary prizes in several western European countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can see a large number of examples. In France, the Goncourt prize since 2000 has been dominated by historical novels, including Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*, which won in 2006, or Laurent Binet's *HHhH*, which won the Goncourt Prize for a First Novel (Prix Goncourt du Premier Roman) in 2010.<sup>169</sup> In Britain, the Booker Prize has been won by Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009)

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<sup>169</sup> These French novels also show that there have been various returns to the Second World War in twenty-first century European literature, which we can also see in the New Italian Epic corpus. Anderson states that, whilst American historical fiction tends to examine 'race (Styron, Morrison, Doctorow, Walker) and empire (Vidal, Pynchon, DeLillo, Mailer, Sontag)', in Europe it has been 'the Third Reich and the Judeocide that have polarised historical imagination: Grass, Tournier, Sebald' (2011).

and *Bring up the Bodies* (2012). In Spain, Javier Cercas won the National Novel Prize (Premio Nacional de Literatura en la modalidad de Narrativa) for *Anatomía de un instante* (*The Anatomy of a Moment*) in 2010, the same year that Pennacchi won the Strega Prize in Italy for *Canale Mussolini*.

This boom in historical fiction could be seen as surprising in the light of what Jameson has described a ‘crisis in historicity’ that characterised late 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural production (1991: 22), and the postmodern turn that saw theorists such as Hayden White arguing against the alleged ‘truth’ of historical accounts, as the past was unknowable. However, Boxall has noted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘an attempt to rethink the relationship between history and narrative, and to gain a new understanding of the way that historical material asserts itself in the contemporary imagination’ (2013: 41). In his analysis of recent historical fiction, such as W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*<sup>170</sup> and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Boxall detects a ‘twin pressure – the political desire for historical realism and the self-reflexive aesthetic engagement with the limits of narrative in capturing experience’ (2013: 81). We will see a similar twin pressure in the texts analysed in this chapter.

That is not to say that there has not been a radical break between 20<sup>th</sup> century historical novels and those of the new millennium. Elias describes many texts of the latter half of the twentieth century as embodying a concept of history as something that can never be fully accessed or grasped: ‘for the post-traumatic metahistorical imagination, history is desire, the desire for the unceasingly deferred, sublime space of History’ (2001: 187). As Boscolo argues, this desire can also be detected in the historical novels of the New Italian

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<sup>170</sup> *Austerlitz*, and indeed Sebald’s work in general, can be seen as displaying similar concerns to the New Italian Epic, and could be described as unidentified narrative objects. Genna has written about *Austerlitz* on his blog as one of the texts that influenced his writing of *Hitler*: <http://www.giugenna.com/2007/12/07/avvicinamenti-al-romanzo-hitler-sebald-e-austerlitz/#more-475> (accessed 07.08.15).

Epic nebula (2010b: 25-28),<sup>171</sup> and, I would argue, in recent historical novels from beyond Italy's borders. It is interesting that Elias sees the desire to confront the past in the texts she analyses as linked to a sense of trauma, or ““history that hurts”” (2001: 187), in some cases related to the legacy of colonialism. Similarly, as we have already seen in the previous two chapters and will see once again here, these texts often address or ‘remediate’<sup>172</sup> traumatic, unresolved experiences from the past in their novels.

Contemporary writers display a similar commitment to those analysed by Elias to portraying a past that, even if it cannot be fully grasped, can be aimed at and evoked. Like Binet or Cercas, the New Italian Epic writers often bring to the fore the author's role as historical researcher or investigator, and interweave personal memories with their subject matter, implying the subjective, contingent nature of the historical knowledge their texts offer, whilst also attempting to paint a vivid picture of the past events they address. In *The Anatomy of a Moment*, Cercas describes his approach to unravelling the Spanish coup of 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1981 as follows:

I propose to [...] describe the plot of the coup, an almost seamless fabric of private conversations, confidences and understandings that I can often only try to reconstruct from indirect testimonies, stretching the limits of the possible until they touch the probable and with the pattern of the plausible trying to outline the shape of the truth. Naturally, I cannot guarantee that everything I am about to tell is true; but I can

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<sup>171</sup> However, Boscolo argues that the difference between the New Italian Epic and the texts Elias analyses is that the New Italian Epic ‘does not display the postmodernist traces Elias identifies’ (2010b: 26); again, I would argue that, on the contrary, we can certainly detect postmodernist traces.

<sup>172</sup> This idea has been taken by Erll and Rigney (2009) from media studies – in particular, from *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999) by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin – and employed in cultural memory studies to describe the way in which we remember historical events. It will be more fully developed in the section of this chapter on Scurati's *Una storia romantica*.

guarantee that it is concocted with truth and especially that it is the closest that I can get to the truth, or to imagining it (2011a: 239).

We will see the New Italian Epic writers similarly approaching, but not claiming to fully capture, some kind of truth about the history they depict.

Despite parallels with recent literature from outside of Italy, I will begin this chapter by examining the ways in which the New Italian Epic novels engage with a specifically Italian tradition that can be traced back to Manzoni's archetypal historical novel *I promessi sposi* and his theories about combining literature and history that would be taken up a century later by Italian microhistorians. I will then look at the two main ways in which these recent Italian writers use the form of the historical novel that the texts I analyse in this chapter will demonstrate. The first is that of re-thinking well-known historical events in order to save them from mythologisation and to indicate the lost opportunities they represent, as seen in Scurati's *Una storia romantica*. The second approach inserts into an accepted version of the past the story of a marginalised individual who has been traditionally forgotten or excluded from historical memory, generally engaging with Italian colonial history, as seen in Antar Mohamed and Wu Ming 2's *Timira. Romanzo meticcio*. These two strands also have many parallels, both in the tools they employ to dig up the past, and in the concerns that underlie their representations of history and historiography. Whilst there is a tendency in the New Italian Epic to reject their postmodern precursors, and, in the case of the historical novels, to distance themselves from Eco's hugely successful 1980 historical novel, *Il nome della rosa*, we will see that some continuity can be detected with what came before.

The two approaches I examine are by no means the only ways of portraying history in the New Italian Epic novels. Other texts that fall outside these parameters also merit attention, such as the depiction of famous figures in history in works that could be called

biofiction – as seen in Genna’s examination of the life of *Hitler* (2008), or Arpaia’s depiction of Walter Benjamin in *L’angelo della storia* (2001) – as opposed to the tendency that we will see here to focus on more marginal characters. There is also Evangelisti’s merging of science fiction and history throughout his *oeuvre*, or the use of alternative history fiction, as seen in Brizzi’s trilogy beginning with *L’inattesa piega degli eventi* (discussed in chapter two), Wu Ming 5’s *Havana Glam*,<sup>173</sup> or Alessandro Zaccuri’s *Il signor figlio*.<sup>174</sup> However, these approaches are less commonly employed by the New Italian Epic writers, and the key themes of the two main approaches overlap with them in many ways. The two strands that I have chosen to focus on are united by being moments in history which can be seen in Wu Ming 1’s terms as ‘ucronie potenziali’ (2009a: 34), that is, moments in which there are fractures or *pieghe* or gaps, whether due to lost potentialities (as we will see in *Una storia romantica*) or because of attempts to forget (as we will see in *Timira*), and these gaps are then filled by fiction. As Mantel put it in a recent short story that imagines the assassination of Margaret Thatcher: ‘History could always have been otherwise’ (2014: 240). The novels we will see here show that they can reflect on other possibilities in the past even when they do not employ alternative history fiction or science fiction, and, by doing so, reflect on identity and historiography today.

## Manzoni’s Legacy

When writing about the New Italian Epic historical novels in the Memorandum, Wu Ming 1 states: ‘Ovvio, ma inevitabile citare il romanzo protonazionale, quello che posò le fondamenta stesse dello scrivere romanzi in lingua italiana: *I promessi sposi*’ (2009a: 16). He

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<sup>173</sup> In his 2001 text, Wu Ming 5 re-imagines David Bowie in the seventies as a communist sympathiser.

<sup>174</sup> In his 2007 text, Zaccuri images the life of the poet Giacomo Leopardi in London after 1837, which was the actual year of his death.



goes on to say that *I promessi sposi* initiated a great Italian tradition of historical novels that defined their era, such as *Confessioni di un italiano* by Ippolito Nievo, *Il Gattopardo* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, or *Artemesia* by Anna Banti.<sup>175</sup> He rightly states of the writers of the nebula: ‘hanno ben presente questa tradizione e dialogano con essa’ (2009a: 16). Despite writing the seminal Italian historical novel, on the basis of his theoretical work, Manzoni went on to reject literature as a means of accessing history. *I promessi sposi*, an unidentified narrative object *avant la lettre*, and Manzoni’s writings on history and fiction, raise some fascinating ideas and tensions that were later picked up by Italian theorists, historians and writers, and continue to be present in the recent historical novels of the nebula. Manzoni’s presence can also be felt beyond the historical novels, as we will see in chapter five, where his exposé of injustice, ‘Storia della colonna infame’, can be seen as a reference point for the New Italian Epic *inchieste*. Manzoni is even directly mentioned in some texts: for example, he enters as a character in Scurati’s *Una storia romantica*, as we shall see, and the character Cristiano in De Michele’s trilogy, who is in prison, ‘passa le sue giornate a leggere e rileggere Manzoni’ (2004: 55). Serkowska’s statement about the 20<sup>th</sup> century historical novelists she analysed in *Dopo il romanzo storico* continues to hold true: ‘Manzoni è presente nel DNA e nel subconscio dei nostri scrittori’ (2012: 412).

A function of *I promessi sposi* that later writers have drawn on is that of provoking reflection on modes of understanding history. Codebò argues that the way in which Manzoni incorporated documentation into his novel makes *I promessi sposi* the precursor to the new historical novels of the twentieth century, whose writers ‘wanted to discuss the methods for apprehending history rather than luring readers into illusory worlds’ (2010: 72). Such foregrounding of the historical operation has been taken beyond new historical novels to

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<sup>175</sup> Elsa Morante’s *La Storia* is conspicuous by its absence from Wu Ming 1’s list.

those of the New Italian Epic, which often contain detailed notes about sources at the end, or ‘Titoli di coda’ as they are called in Wu Ming’s work, or provide extra material online, as seen most extensively in the case of Wu Ming’s *Manituana* (see chapter one). They may also incorporate documentation within the narrative itself, as demonstrated by the various ‘reperti’ we will see dispersed throughout Wu Ming 2 and Mohamed’s *Timira. Romanzo meticcio*, or Roberto Santachiara and Wu Ming 1’s continuous citations of other sources in *Point Lenana*. Like Manzoni’s interjection on the *bravi* in chapter one of *I promessi sposi*, for instance, this interrupts the narrative and reminds readers that this work of literature was based on historical research. In the nebula, we can detect ethical charge and significance in this archival and intellectual labour, which is foregrounded heavily, and in which author/s and readers are seen as having the opportunity to participate as (notional) equals, co-investigators and co-producers of the text they are reading.

Yet, Manzoni had a dual approach like many of the New Italian Epic writers; as well as breaking the illusion with the inclusion of historical detail, he aimed to bring his readers closer to the past. *I promessi sposi* calls into question the grand narrative of History, typified by the reference to ‘L’historia’ (2010: 5) in the manuscript reproduced in the foreword that the narrator has supposedly found. With its stuffy and archaic historical narration, it represents a past that seems far removed from us, cold and dead. But, after that, the text moves to the contemporary language of the narrator, and then to the personal viewpoint of Renzo, thus closing the gap between then and now (as Della Colletta points out 1995: 65). It also shifts its focus from the traditional subject matter of History, that is great events and important people, or what the manuscript describes as ‘le Imprese de Principi e Potentati, e qualificati Personaggi’ (2010: 5), to the story of Renzo and Lucia, choosing to focus on history with a small ‘h’ and the ways in which ordinary people, whose stories are often forgotten or silenced by History, are at the mercy of wider historical events.

Centring on a personal and individual story, or the stories of several individuals, in order to raise points about history and historiography, is almost omnipresent in the historical novels of the New Italian Epic nebula. Despite obvious differences, Lucia and Renzo's displacement and quest to be united against a backdrop of wider historical events, which Manzoni refers to with evident irony – 'Molte cose importanti, di quelle a cui più specialmente si dà titolo di storiche, erano accadute in questo frattempo' (2010: 545) – find echoes in these recent Italian texts. The main protagonist of Wu Ming's *54*, Pierre, embarks on an odyssey in search of his father that is criss-crossed by wider events and deeply affected by the after-effects of the Second World War. Adele and Matteo's search for one another in Scrittura industriale collettiva's *In territorio nemico* is constantly deferred by the struggles in a war-torn Italy that recalls the devastation of Manzoni's description of a plague-ridden Milan. In *Una storia romantica*, we will see Aspasia and Jacopo find their love thwarted as they are separated by larger forces in a close resemblance of Manzoni's betrothed, and could be described as Scurati describes the real-life figure of the politician Casati: 'sospinto dall'onda degli eventi' (2007: 148). This conception of a wider History as a powerful force is most clearly present in *I promessi sposi* when Manzoni characterises it as 'come un turbino vasto, incalzante, vagabondo' (2010: 526). The New Italian Epic draws on the Manzonian model of subaltern characters that are buffeted by this machine of history.

The idea of needing to reinvigorate the past and, like Manzoni, to work against the coldly academic version of 'l'istoria', is widespread in New Italian Epic texts, whose writers strive to bring history back to life in all its detail, rather than leaving it set in stone. A prime example of this can be seen in Evangelisti's introduction to his text *Controinsurrezioni*, written jointly with Moresco, which, like Scurati's *Una storia romantica*, re-evaluates the Risorgimento from unusual angles. Evangelisti states that this period has become embalmed, commemorated only by official versions in school history books and cold monuments, its

iconography ‘fatta di statue e di cimeli’ (Evangelisti and Moresco 2008: 11). To rescue it from such oblivion, he and Moresco each contributed to the volume sharply contrasting short stories based in 1848 and 1849. In Evangelisti’s introduction, he argues that writers can paint more colourful pictures than historians can and use poetic licence: ‘Solo la narrativa può restituire, in parte, il sapore di ciò che accadde. Gli odori, i colori: una verità che lo storico, vincolato a criteri quantitativi e a valutazioni asettiche, non può permettersi’ (Evangelisti and Moresco 2008: 13). It is significant that Evangelisti uses the word ‘verità’ to talk about what writers can do, as the idea that there is another type of literary truth frequently resurfaces in the texts of the New Italian Epic nebula, and this is no less true of the historical novels.

In ‘Del romanzo storico’, Manzoni would reject such an approach to writing, although this essay also contains several contradictions that imply he had not fully resolved some of the tensions that are present in, and have in fact been embraced by, more recent Italian *romanzi storici*. Manzoni criticised historical novels by raising two main qualms: either they do not distinguish clearly enough between history and fiction, or, if they do separate the two, this ruins the unity of the work (1973: 1727). Yet as Bermann (1984: 45-6), de Groot (2010: 31) and Pocci (2012: 230) have pointed out, *I promessi sposi* constitutes a good example of the ways in which history and fiction can co-exist in a novel without merging into one another or misleading the reader.

Moreover, the essay is not the outright condemnation of historical novels that it would seem to be. Twice Manzoni uses map similes to compare historical and literary interpretations, which on closer analysis suggest a more nuanced conception of both history and historical novels as referring to the same object, whilst neither being a substitute for the original events. His first metaphor is put in the mouth of his imaginary interlocutor, who describes the distinction between traditional historical writing and historical novels as being:

la stessa differenza, in certo modo, che tra una carta geografica, dove sono segnate le catene de' monti, i fiumi, le città, i borghi, le strade maestre d'una vasta regione, e una carta topografica, nella quale, e tutto questo è più particolarizzato (dico quel tanto che ne può entrare in uno spazio molto più ristretto di paese), e ci sono di più segnate anche le alture minori, e le disuguaglianze ancor meno sensibili del terreno, e i borri, le gore, i villaggi, le case isolate, le viottole (1973: 1727-8).

This is not in fact an opposition between the two representations, as both maps are describing the same territory simply on a different scale (as pointed out by D'Angelo 2013: 141). In fact, it recalls Evangelisti's statement, quoted above, about the benefits of a literary presentation of history that can give more details for readers to engage with. Evangelisti's description of the writer being able to evoke smells and colours that the historian cannot is even more similar to the second reference to maps made by Manzoni, in which he describes the role of narration and conjecture in history as being

come chi, disegnando la pianta d'una città, ci aggiunge, in diverso colore, strade, piazze, edifizî progettati; e col presentar distinte dalle parti che sono, quelle che potrebbero essere, fa che si veda la ragione di pensarle riunite (1973: 1734).

Here he seems to be saying that if writers simply create a distinction between what happened and what could have happened, between fact and conjecture, then there is enough unity in the fact that it is gesturing towards reality, and, indeed, this combination can give us a better, and more vivid, overall understanding of the past.

This is a view that more recent writers seem to subscribe to. Wu Ming 2 explains the aim of New Italian Epic texts in similar terms: 'Se per indagare i fatti usiamo la narrativa, e non la storia o le scienze umane, è perché vogliamo permetterci di essere visionari, di

dimostrare per assurdo e per metafora, di concatenare gli eventi con simboli e analogie, di immaginare, quando ci mancano, quel che succederebbe se avessimo le prove' (2009: 190). Here, he is also referencing Pasolini's famous statement 'Io so, ma non ho le prove' (1974), another key reference point for the combinations of reality and possibility that we see in the nebula, as I discussed in chapter one. Similar to Pasolini's belief that he knew about the secrets he was revealing 'perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore, che cerca di [...] immaginare tutto ciò che non si sa o che si tace' (1974), there is a sense in the work of these writers that Manzoni's more colourful, embellished maps of the past reveal something more profound than straightforward historical accounts based solely on proof.

It was Manzoni's map metaphors that Carlo Ginzburg would seize on a century later in defence of the role of conjecture and literary narration in historical accounts in his postscript to Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Ginzburg finds Manzoni ahead of his time in imagining a possible type of history that would describe what Manzoni's interlocutor calls 'effetti privati degli avvenimenti pubblici che si chiamano più propriamente storici, e delle leggi, o delle volontà de' potenti, in qualunque maniera siano manifestate' (1973: 1728). Ginzburg saw this as a highly innovative approach and a challenge that it took a century for historians to take up (2006: 307-8), which they did so with microhistory. In reducing the scale of analysis as Manzoni did in *I promessi sposi*, microhistorians could examine how the systems of power impacted on the forgotten protagonists of history, and then move from this small-scale analysis to wider implications. They tended to use a literary mode to relate these stories of individuals or small social groups, and drew less of a stark distinction between history and conjecture than their predecessors did.

This approach can be seen both in Davis' text and in Ginzburg's influential work of microhistorical analysis, *Il formaggio e i vermi* (1976), which, as Pocci (2012) has pointed

out, has several parallels with Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, and it is also another important precursor for the New Italian Epic texts. In a novelistic style,<sup>176</sup> Ginzburg analysed the life of one man, Domenico Scandella, known as Menocchio, trying to piece together the story of this subaltern subject of history and what it showed about 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy, but also equally reflecting on how we apprehend history. Ginzburg describes the text in the introduction to the English edition in terms that recall Benjamin's monadological approach that I discussed in chapter one, saying that the study evokes 'an unnoticed but extraordinary fragment of a reality, half obliterated, which implicitly poses a series of questions for our own culture and for us' (1980: xii).<sup>177</sup> This description could equally be applied to many of the historical novels of the New Italian Epic nebula, which, in keeping with a microhistorical approach, tend to zero in on the minor protagonists within the time period depicted in order to consider how people understand and experience history, but these fragments of the past are left open to questions and doubts. It is no coincidence that Ginzburg too came out of the fertile atmosphere of Bologna in the seventies, and even taught Wu Ming when they were students at the University of Bologna; their novel *Q* as Luther Blissett was inspired by a seminar given by Ginzburg and Prosperi (Baird 2006: 254). This approach to history is a political choice; Szijártó states: 'Microhistory seems to be the best medicine against the "simple truths" of history' (Magnússon and Szijártó 2013: 63). These recent Italian writers emulate this by validating perspectives that disrupt the dominant 'truth' constructed by national (and international) historiography.

Despite being an advocate of reading signs, symptoms and clues to decipher reality, Ginzburg never glossed over the role of aporia and gaps in our knowledge about history. In *Il*

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<sup>176</sup> See for example the opening (as pointed out by Pocchi 2012: 231 footnote 6).

<sup>177</sup> Peltonen (2001) has also compared microhistory's move from micro- to macro-dimensions to Benjamin's monads, as well as to de Certeau and his work on marginal phenomena in *La possession de Loudun* (1970) and *L'Ecriture de l'Histoire* (1975).

*formaggio e i vermi* he instead sought to bring these aspects to the fore, without blending them into the story, which Manzoni would have approved of: ‘le ipotesi, i dubbi, le incertezze diventavano parte della narrazione; la ricerca della verità diventava parte dell’esposizione della (necessariamente incompleta) verità raggiunta’ (2006: 256). Indeed, Ginzburg pointed out a perceptive distinction in relation to *The Return of Martin Guerre*: ‘La ricerca (e la narrazione) della Davis non s’impenna sulla contrapposizione tra “vero” e “inventato” ma sull’integrazione, sempre segnalata puntualmente, di “realtà” e “possibilità” (al plurale)’ (2006: 298-9). This harks back to what Wu Ming 2 said about exploring what could have happened in the past in order to bridge the gap between what we know and what we do not.<sup>178</sup> Like Ginzburg or Davis, New Italian Epic historical novels tend not to be misleading about this operation (as we shall see in both *Una storia romantica* and *Timira*), but rather ‘come clean’ about their conjectures. They frequently use introductions or postscripts to disrobe the ways in which the facts were used in order to empower their readers to reach a deeper understanding of their message and of the past in a way Ginzburg, and also Manzoni before him, would advocate.

It is worth analysing the ways in which microhistory, whilst based on evidence, is also closely tied up with literature not only in the way its approach has later been detected in novels, or in its literary style of narration. It is telling that Ginzburg said that the impetus for writing *Il formaggio e i vermi* came from reading Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*; he was inspired by its intersections between the public and private domains, and Tolstoy’s desire to narrate the stories of all the people who participated in these past events (Ginzburg 2006: 257). In an essay about Stendhal, who saw his novels as containing more truth than history, Ginzburg suggests that fiction, and in particular the use of free indirect discourse as one of the narrative

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<sup>178</sup> Piga also connects the New Italian Epic to Davis and Ginzburg’s approaches to history, when discussing *Manituana*’s multiperspectival narrative and the ‘what if’ approach to history that is employed by Wu Ming (2010: 53-4).



tools that can help reach an understanding of history, could benefit historians, rather than being in opposition to historical knowledge:

Siamo in una zona situata a di qua (o al di là) della conoscenza storica, e ad essa inaccessibile. Ma i procedimenti narrativi sono come campi magnetici: provocano domande, e attraggono documenti potenziali. In questo senso un procedimento come il discorso diretto libero, nato per rispondere, sul terreno della finzione, a una serie di domande poste dalla storia, può essere considerato come una sfida indiretta lanciata agli storici. Un giorno essi potrebbero raccoglierla, in forme che oggi non riusciamo a immaginare (2006: 184).

Ginzburg in no way advocates simply inventing things about history, but does not rule out the fruitful relationship between history and literary invention. This is a fascinating theory for a historian, and one that the New Italian Epic writers would seem to subscribe to, as their texts are part of a desire to provoke questions and challenge their readers to consider what they are saying. Ginzburg seems to be very much part of the Manzonian tradition of cross-pollination between historical writing and literature. This dialogue and borrowing between the disciplines of history and fiction has clearly continued into the twenty-first century.

Interestingly, Ginzburg, like Wu Ming and other Italian writers and critics, displays a wariness towards postmodernism, whilst simultaneously absorbing elements of it. He deeply mistrusted postmodernist relativism, and he and Giovanni Levi spoke out against depriving historiography of cognitive value (2006: 264-5). He insisted instead on being able to access historical truth through the use of evidence. However, he does suggest that the way in which the literary narration of microhistory admits to a lack of total knowledge of the past mirrors the literary production of the twentieth century. Just as novels have moved away from the omniscient narrator of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, narrative history has not shied away from revealing

the incompleteness of historical knowledge. He argues that our sensibilities as readers began to be changed not only with changing historiography, but also with the work of writers like Marcel Proust and Robert Musil, or even with Fellini's film *8 ½*, so that, today: 'Il rapporto tra chi narra e la realtà appare più incerto, più problematico [...] l'intreccio tra realtà e finzione, tra verità e possibilità è al centro delle elaborazioni artistiche di questo secolo' (2006: 313-4). This seems to align him with a postmodernist climate of ontological questions and uncertainty. In many ways, his ideas were not dissimilar to those of White, who argued that accounts of history are a type of narration, that 'what distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form' (1987: 27). Pisani (2007) has insightfully pointed out that there are more overlaps and fewer oppositions than the two thinkers tended to realise between their approaches to historical knowledge. Like the New Italian Epic writers, Ginzburg tends towards questioning sources of knowledge, yet resists what he saw as a postmodern descent into complete epistemological doubt.

Della Colletta rightly asserts that Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* and 'Del romanzo storico' established 'the problematic and contradictory parameters that influenced the development of historical fiction in Italy' (1996: 198), and, as we have seen, Manzoni's approach also influenced the development of microhistory. However, I would also suggest that it is unsurprising that this specifically Italian interplay between reality and fiction has continued to play a role in Italian historical fiction in the twenty-first century when so many of the events of the nation's recent history remain shadowy or misrepresented. Memory wars over the events of the *anni di piombo* continue to be played out on the public stage, not to mention the questions still being raised over Fascist Italy, as shown by the controversy surrounding the monument in Affile to Rodolfo Graziani in 2012. It is no coincidence that Scrittura industriale collettiva named their novel about the much contested Italian Resistance *In territorio nemico*. The past in Italy is enemy territory, it is contested territory, and it is a

territory we can never truly access. These New Italian Epic writers explore such ideas, at the same time trying to make the past less inimical, or in L. P. Hartley's famous wording in *The Go Between*, less of a foreign country, without ignoring the role of doubt, and possibility, in historical knowledge, in line with a practice dating back to Manzoni.

### ***Una storia romantica* by Antonio Scurati**

In Scurati's *Una storia romantica* (2007), we encounter an ageing and neurotic Manzoni, peeping fearfully out of his window at the revolutionaries he will not join during the *Cinque giornate* in Milan in 1848, more or less demanding they get out of his back yard: 'Più in là, più in là, di loro di andare a farla più in là questa rivoluzione. Perché la devono dare proprio davanti alla porta di casa mia?' (261). Once again, the issue of paternity seems to be at stake, as Manzoni is described as a father who rejects his children: 'il simbolo vivente della patria italiana non fosse disposto ad accogliere i suoi figli' (98). Through the elderly Manzoni's refusal to be actively involved in the insurrection, Scurati raises questions over the writer's role in society and what literature can do, questions that, as we have seen, Manzoni himself struggled with. Like *I promessi sposi*, *Una storia romantica* revolves around a manuscript, sent to the main protagonist Italo thirty-seven years after the *Cinque giornate*, in which he reads about his then betrothed, Aspasia, and her infidelity to him with his friend Jacopo. Italo aptly frames the discovery of the truth about his past as one of digging up bodies years later, evoking the ghosts of the past – 'che idea romantica!' (16) – which is what the text itself seems to do by evoking nineteenth century Italy. This operation invites reflection across temporal divides and expresses ideas about history and Italy's present that have far wider implications than the text's simple title suggests.

*Una storia romantica* was published a year before the appearance of the Memorandum, in which Wu Ming 1 briefly describes it: ‘Scurati [...] riprende la tradizione del romanzo alla Fogazzaro, portandole in dote un curriculum di romanzi “ibridi” e saggi di teoria estetica e letteraria’ (2009a: 13). Indeed, despite seeming to be a classical example of the historical novel genre, as Wu Ming 1 points out, it is in fact deeply hybrid and allegorical, as we will see. By imitating the nineteenth century historical novel, Scurati returns to a time of ideals and a struggle for freedom, when literature was used in Italy as a vehicle for political ideology,<sup>179</sup> just as the New Italian Epic seems to advocate a return to literary *impegno*. The nineteenth century Scurati depicts also has other parallels with the climate of twenty-first century Italy. It was a time that pitted classical tradition and rhetoric against new and innovative approaches to art. Camilletti has pointed out that the tensions of the Classicist versus Romanticist quarrel in the nineteenth century seemed to be re-posed by the debate surrounding the New Italian Epic phenomenon, ‘showing again how the dichotomies between tradition and newness, preservation and avant-garde, national heritage and foreign inspiration, still form a tensive core within Italian culture and society’ (2013: 18). He also underlines the way in which both debates centred around generational conflict, ‘issues of parenthood, legitimacy and usurpation’ (2013: 18), as writers were wrestling with the after-effects of what came before, just as those today are re-assessing the legacy of the twentieth century.

This tensive core can be detected within *Una storia romantica* too, which combines the old and the new, serious political considerations and playful postmodern experimentation. Scurati employs some of the tropes of the Romantic novel, with the exaggerated love story relying on clichés, such as love in the time of war, and the female adulterer’s forbidden love

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<sup>179</sup> Ganeri points out that the historical novel was used in the nineteenth century as a vehicle for liberal, Risorgimento ideas (1999: 31).

recalling that of other contemporary novelistic examples, such as *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina* or *Effie Briest*. The text also frequently draws attention to its own fictionality, for example likening Jacopo to a Foscolo hero (40) and Aspasia to ‘l’eroina di un improbabile romanzo d’appendice’ (52). These aspects could encourage us to see the novel as parody, yet it contains deep reflection on the issues at stake. The grim horrors of the conflict are constantly played out alongside the romance between Jacopo and Aspasia. The fighting on the barricades mimicking Hugo’s *Les Misérables* is portrayed in all seriousness, and at moments it has a real sense of pathos, for example when the kidnapped girl Lucia Mattioli is returned to her father after being abused and raped, made to crawl back to safety in her broken state, ‘come accecata dalle violenze subite’ (209). Eco’s commentary on the film *Casablanca* provides an interesting reference point here, and not only because *Una storia romantica* echoes the film itself when Aspasia melodramatically asks herself: ‘*Sono i cannoni di Radetsky o è il mio cuore che batte?*’ (189). Eco describes *Casablanca*’s clichés and archetypal situations: ‘l’Amore infelice’, ‘la Terra Promessa’, ‘il mito del Sacrificio’ (1977: 136-140) – which are arguably present in Scurati’s novel too – but posits that the way in which they are employed in the film reaches epic and sublime heights: ‘Quando tutti gli archetipi irrompono senza decenza, si raggiungono profondità omeriche. Due cliché fanno ridere. Cento cliché commuovono’ (1977: 142).

Another of Eco’s reflections on cliché is brought to mind by the love story in Scurati’s text, that is his words in the postscript to *Il nome della rosa*, which Wu Ming 1 refers to in the Memorandum:

Nelle *Postille a Il nome della rosa* Umberto Eco diede una definizione del postmodernismo divenuta celeberrima. Paragonò l’autore postmoderno a un amante che vorrebbe dire all’amata: ‘Ti amo disperatamente’, ma sa di non poterlo dire

perché è una frase da romanzo rosa, da libro di Liala, e allora enuncia: ‘Come direbbe Liala, ti amo disperatamente’.

Negli anni successivi, l’abuso di quest’atteggiamento portò a una stagflazione della parola e a una sovrabbondanza di metafiction: raccontare del proprio raccontare per non dover raccontare d’altro.

Oggi la via d’uscita è sostituire la premessa e spostare l’accento su quel che importa davvero: ‘Nonostante Liala, ti amo disperatamente’. Il cliché è evocato e subito messo da parte, la dichiarazione d’amore inizia a ricaricarsi di senso (2009a: 24).

There seems to be a similar operation in *Una storia romantica*: Scurati evokes clichés, but then sets them aside to inject his love story with meaning and move his readers. Yet, he is also employing tools that could be associated with postmodernism, bringing *Una storia romantica* closer to Eco’s *Il nome della rosa* than Wu Ming 1 and others would acknowledge. Wu Ming 1 speaks damningly of Eco’s historical novel in a footnote in the Memorandum (2009a: 16n10), criticising its tongue-in-cheek parody and citationism, which would be lost on the ‘lettore ingenuo’ that Eco refers to in the postscript (2005: 525). Genna’s review of *Una storia romantica* is in keeping with this distancing from *Il nome della rosa*, as he states that Scurati is not smiling at us from behind the mask of history as Eco did (2007a).

Yet, there is some smiling going on behind *Una storia romantica*, and also behind other novels in the New Italian Epic nebula,<sup>180</sup> which can sometimes be read on different

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<sup>180</sup> Wu Ming themselves cannot seem to resist knowing winks to their readers in their historical novels. For example, in *Q*, the main protagonist is unconvinced that an energising drink from Arabia, made from beans and called *quahvé*, will take off in Europe (Blissett 1999: 617-8). In 54, Cary Grant and David Niven discuss ‘un libro ridicolo e disgustoso, scritto da un certo Fleming. Il protagonista è un agente MI6 di nome “James Bond”. [...] Ecco un libro da cui non trarranno mai un film!’ (2002: 215).

levels, hiding their inner workings on a more superficial reading.<sup>181</sup> Scurati here is engaging in a postmodernist game of mirrors, as we realise when the story ends, and we encounter the ‘Tabula gratulatoria’, in which he lists the extensive variety of borrowings and inspiration that went into the text, followed by the ‘Tabula mistificatoria’, in which he indicates the historical sources. In the former section, the list of this huge range of influences shows the text to be almost a collage or cut-up made up of parts taken from films, songs, philosophy, outright borrowing of situations and characters from other texts, and pop culture, to create what he calls ‘[un]opera di bracconaggio’ (547). This seems to highlight that the way in which we understand history is filtered or remediated through other accounts. It recalls Glynn’s work on Eco and other ‘anti-illusionist historical novels’, which seek to ‘present a plurality of histories, or at least *a* contingent history, rather than *the* history’ (2005: 27). Or, indeed, Hutcheon’s work on historiographic metafiction is brought to mind, which teaches us ‘that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past [...] This is not a “dishonest refuge from truth” but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs’ (1988: 89).

The key difference between Eco’s and Scurati’s historical novels could be seen in the fact that, in *Una storia romantica*, we might remain the ‘lettore ingenuo’ for much of the text, but he ensures that we understand the mechanics and sense of *impegno* behind the text by explaining himself in detail in these final sections. Eco’s postscript, on the other hand, was not initially appended to the novel, but appeared in *Alfabeta* three years after the novel first appeared (Eco 2005: 505), and Eco is arguably not as open in explaining the workings of the

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<sup>181</sup> I am thinking, for example, of the outcry about the parts of *Gomorra* that Saviano invented (discussed in the following chapter), which must have seemed surprising to readers who read it as a journalistic investigation, perhaps being misled by its attention to detail and inclusion of statistics into seeing it as a work of non-fiction. *Q* could also be read as a more straightforward, illusionist historical novel (Glynn 2005), if it were not for the final section of images and captions, suggesting allegorical possibilities for interpretation. It is no coincidence that, when *Q* first appeared with an anonymous author, some suggested that it had been written by Eco (Arie and Ezard 2003).

text as Scurati is. Scurati states: ‘Il mio intento non era quello del gioco intellettuale’ (547), saying that he wanted to harness the power of these other artistic products and encourage his readers to go and read, listen to and watch the sources for his novel, in order to gain a powerful sense of what he wanted to convey. He lays out the workings of his novel, because he wants his readers to re-engage with a history he feels has lost its power. This is a belief which he put forward in *Letteratura dell’inesperienza* and re-states in *Una storia romantica*: ‘Nell’epoca in cui viviamo, non migliore né peggiore di altre, il passato sembra aver perso la sua forza’ (547).

This questionable view about the past having lost its force suggests what Antonello has described as ‘one of the formulaic elements which allegedly define postmodern epistemology’, that is ‘the flattening of any temporal perspective into an everlasting present, effacing memory, recovering the past only for parodic purposes’ (2009: 235). Scurati sees himself working against this in *Una storia romantica* by giving a sense of depth to the present. This view has also been implied by other critics, including Amici, who states when discussing the New Italian Epic that ‘working on the past is a natural form of resistance because of its capacity to exalt that which the techno-communicative transition tends to undermine from within: the profundity of the present, its roots in the past, the complexity of history’ (2010a: 14). Yet, I would echo Antonello’s scepticism about this alleged perpetual present. As I argued in the introduction to this study, the digital era has brought with it new methods for interacting with the past and archival material. Our relationship with history is complex and varied in the twenty-first century, and we are not simply overwhelmed with a ‘deluge of information concerning the here and now’ (Amici 2010a: 14). Antonello rightly



points out that the growth in interest in cultural memory studies indicates that we have formulated new ways of understanding how history and identity work (2009: 236).<sup>182</sup>

Moreover, I would not argue that Eco's aims in *Il nome della rosa* are very different from Scurati's, even if Eco's novel has been held up as indicative of this use of the past for pure parody. Eco's aims are more hidden, and he relies on more work from the reader, for example in deciphering the Latin clues hidden in the narrative.<sup>183</sup> However, Serkowska rightly sees in *Il nome della rosa*, and also in Eco's later text *La misteriosa fiamma della Regina Loana*, 'un riconoscibile fondo di impegno, ancorché abilmente dissimulato, mai pronunciato o sottoscritto in modo diretto' (2012: 372). She points to an ethical underpinning to the way in which Eco invites his readers to scrutinise the past and confront memories. Eco himself stated in the postscript to *Il nome della rosa* that talking about the medieval period was simply a mask (2005: 512), and, as Serkowska points out, he embedded references to the *anni di piombo* in the plot of his novel (2012: 377). He was reflecting on the present by using the past as metaphor, just as we see the New Italian Epic writers do.<sup>184</sup>

This metaphorical approach in *Una storia romantica* comes from the fact that it can be placed in a broader constellation of highly allegorical New Italian Epic texts that examine the subject of normal people taking action and resisting authority, frequently followed by

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<sup>182</sup> Antonello (2009) discusses recent ideas of *impegno* as expressed in theatrical storytelling, which has many overlaps with the approaches of the New Italian Epic writers. Indeed, he considers Ginzburg's evidential paradigm in relation to this type of storytelling (2009: 244-6), and likens their approach to justice to recent Italian *noir* by Carlotto and De Cataldo (2009: 247), as well as to Saviano's approach inspired by Pasolini in *Gomorra* (2009: 250).

<sup>183</sup> For example, the final line: 'stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus' (2005: 503). De Groot explains that this means 'Of the rose of the past, we have only its name', but the use of Latin introduces 'a deferral of meaning, as the reader would either have to translate or miss the reference. The use of untranslated Latin throughout the text is a way of creating levels of knowledge and disclosure, of playing academic tricks on the reader' (2010: 128).

<sup>184</sup> It is also worth mentioning that Eco refers to *I promessi sposi* in his *postille*, showing that he too has drawn on Manzoni's work, and for similar reasons of the embellishments of fiction leading to a deeper understanding than history books can offer, as we see in his statement: 'Vicende e personaggi sono inventati, eppure ci dicono sull'Italia dell'epoca cose che i libri di storia non ci avevano mai detto con altrettanta chiarezza' (2005: 532).

disenchantment and a sense of the pendulum of history swinging back the other way. This can be seen, for example, in Luther Blissett's *Q*, which portrays the Reformation in Europe and the struggle for religious freedom,<sup>185</sup> Alessandro Bertante's *Al diavul*, in which the main character Errico goes to Spain to join the civil war in the thirties,<sup>186</sup> Scrittura industriale collettiva's *In territorio nemico*, about the Italian Resistance in the Second World War,<sup>187</sup> or Wu Ming's *L'Armata dei Sonnambuli*, about the French Revolution.<sup>188</sup> All of these novels portray disillusionment with the final result of their conflicts, and a need to continue fighting for their ideals. This is implied by the epigraph to Wu Ming's historical novel 54: 'Non c'è nessun dopoguerra' (2002), which described the way in which the Second World War did not truly come to an end but simply morphed into the Cold War, but has allegorical possibilities beyond, particularly in light of the fact that the text was being written in 2001 against the backdrop of 9/11 and, closer to home, the G8 in Genoa (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 5), seen by some

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<sup>185</sup> When the name-changing main protagonist and his fellow Protestants win the fight for freedom in Munster, it is only to find a new source of oppression at the hands of corrupt leaders; as the blacksmith observes: 'Qualcuno che ha combattuto per liberare la sua città [...] può pensare di averlo fatto per niente' (1999: 287). *Q* has been seen as an allegory for Bologna's *Movimento del '77* (Genna 2007a), but it also makes wider points about how Europe today was shaped and the beginnings of the capitalist system, as hinted at by the final section in which the historical images are captioned by a press communiqué from Luther Blissett about the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia in 1999 and a quote from Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

<sup>186</sup> It is no coincidence that Bertante mentions Scurati in the acknowledgements (2008: 245), as there are several similarities with *Una storia romantica* which was published only a year before Bertante's historical novel. Errico finds that as he fights he loses his sense of humanity, until at the end nobody celebrates their victory because: 'Non siamo eroi' (2008: 224). This sentiment is not dissimilar to that of Jacopo in his later incarnation as Antonio in Scurati's novel, who points out to Italo in the 1885 section: 'non è più tempo di eroi' (453). Whilst Wu Ming 1 at the time of writing the memorandum saw *Al diavul* as being an allegory for the way in which Italy viewed Spain under Zapatero as more enlightened and culturally superior to their own nation (Wu Ming 2009a: 81), there are wider resonances in this text. Bertante shows how countries can sleep walk into oppression in a way that could be seen as referring to any number of conflicts that spill blood in the name of ideals that later descend into hatred and corruption.

<sup>187</sup> Two of the main characters, Adele and her brother Matteo, join the partisan struggle and actively fight the Nazis, but the text also depicts Adele's husband Aldo, whose fear leads him to hide in his mother's loft and eventually descend into madness in a stark depiction of a lack of *impegno*. The text thus reflects on bravery and cowardice, sacrifice and self-preservation. It closes with presentiments that the end of the war may not bring real change for the people, that whilst they are feeling satisfied with the victory, it may be premature to stop imagining as Matteo does in the final line 'sogni di città e mondi ideali' (2013: 308). From the point of view of allegory, Adele's experience in particular has almost anachronistic elements, reminiscent of the terrorist activities of the Brigate Rosse in the *anni di piombo*, which one of the authors has pointed out was part of their aim to 'indagare le origini del contemporaneo' (Galimberti 2013).

<sup>188</sup> The French Revolution is obviously a key foundational moment for exploring such ideas. In the fourth part of Wu Ming's text, entitled 'Termidoro', D'Amblanc looks at the people around him and thinks: 'sembravano voler dire: "Siamo ancora qui, guardate i nostri candidi colli, guardate le nostre testacce ancora bene attaccate, siamo vivi, siamo sopravvissuti al Terrore e adesso il Terrore siamo noi"' (2014b: 655).

as a type of oppression that recalled previous armed struggles against the authorities, as I explored in chapter two. Errico's father states of Mussolini's rise in *Al Diavul: 'È la Storia che si ripropone'* (Bertante 2008: 64); we see the *topos* of the failed revolution re-propose itself again and again in the nebula.

This can be seen particularly in the texts examining the Risorgimento. Italy's battle for independence in the nineteenth century has been held up by writers including Scurati on the eve of its 150-year commemoration as encapsulating these ideas of betrayed ideals, as shown by the title of De Cataldo's Risorgimento novel *I traditori*, or the statement on the cover of Evangelisti and Moresco's *Controinsurrezioni* dubbing it 'una rivoluzione tradita', or Italo's allusion in *Una storia romantica* to Garibaldi as '[l']eroe tradito' (16). *Noi credevamo*, states the title of Banti's 1967 Risorgimento novel, which De Cataldo adapted into a screenplay for Mario Martone's 2010 film of the same name, the imperfect past tense underlining the erosion of these beliefs, like the disillusioned final speech of the film. Cooke (2012) has shown the ways in which the Resistance in the Second World War has been portrayed as a second Risorgimento, and we could also see subsequent failed revolutions or 'Risorgimenti' in 1968, in the *Movimento del '77*, in the political shake-up of the early nineties culminating in the corruption and conflicts of interest of the *ventennio berlusconiano*, or in the violent quelling of the G8 protests. These parallels are invited by the New Italian Epic texts, as we saw in chapter two in terms of the discourse surrounding the G8 in Genoa, and as we will see here too.

Indeed, the New Italian Epic depictions of the Risorgimento demonstrate the memorial processes that Erll (2009) has described as 'premediation' and 'remediation'. The fight for Italian independence has become the object of premediation, in that it provides a schema – in this case the failed revolution – which can be used for other experiences and

their representation (Erll 2009: 111). In terms of remediation, the Risorgimento has been repeatedly represented over time in different media, so that the term ‘Risorgimento’ has become like the sites of memory Erll discusses, it ‘seems to refer not so much to what one might cautiously call the “actual event”, but instead to a canon of existent medial constructions, to the narratives, images and myths circulating in a memory culture’ (2009: 111). The reference to the circulation of myths here is particularly relevant to the New Italian Epic, which addresses precisely how myths are made, attempting to dismantle or re-think them, fighting against the existing canon but also, simultaneously, re-employing its images.

We can see these processes in action in the story that Moresco contributed to *Controinsurrezioni*. As we saw earlier, this text responded to a need identified by Evangelisti in its introduction to re-animate the Risorgimento in order to rescue it from being ‘tanto “ufficiale” da non esistere nemmeno’ (Evangelisti and Moresco 2008: 11). Moresco’s story was originally intended to be a screenplay, and has a highly original (and arguably postmodern) approach, containing fragmented leaps between time frames, in what he describes as ‘un movimento unico che lega indissolubilmente, insurrezionalmente, il passato, il presente e il futuro’ (Evangelisti and Moresco 2008: 66). Whilst Moresco employs some of the ‘existent medial constructions’ related to the Risorgimento - for example, by including the character of Carlo Pisacane and scenes at the opera staging Giuseppe Verdi’s *Nabucco* - towards the end of his screenplay, he also splices modern scenes of war and devastation into his depiction of nineteenth century Italy:

Inquadratura degli scontri, delle devastazioni e dei bestiali pestaggi di Genova e del sangue sui pavimenti.

Inquadratura dell’enorme voragine dell’esplosione dopo l’attentato a Giovanni Falcone e alla sua scorta.

Inquadratura di corpi e di volti smembrati da bombardamenti e stragi terroristiche.

[...] Inquadratura delle Torri gemelle che crollano.

[...] Inquadratura di barconi pieni di morti che arrivano all'isola di Lampedusa e dei pochi superstiti in delirio, che tremano avvolti nelle coperte (Evangelisti and Moresco 2008: 118).

These powerful images merge with his story of the Risorgimento to form parallels across contexts, or multidirectional memories (Rothberg 2009), as we see in other New Italian Epic texts. Not only do they connect subsequent instances of failed protest or violence to the Risorgimento, they also pose questions about nation-building that are tied up with the nineteenth century context but endure today in different forms. This can be seen in the final image in the above quotation about migrants arriving in Lampedusa, showing mutations in Italy's nationhood from occupied territory fighting for freedom to having closed borders to other struggling nations. Moresco brings different memory sites together to engage actively with the past and present.

Erll's processes of memory are also foregrounded by Scurati in various ways, provoking reflection on the idea that, as the narrator of *Una storia romantica* states: 'Il disastro del presente trascina anche con se il passato' (474). The people's mantra on the barricades of Milan in the text, 'Ora o mai più' (350), gives a strong sense that there was a need for action and they could not let the situation continue as it was, which is echoed by Wu Ming 1's subtitle to the final section of the main body of the Memorandum, 'Presto o tardi' (Wu Ming 2009a: 55), in which he describes how there is an urgency to continue to fight against what has been happening both in Italy and the Western world in general. In terms of the *Cinque giornate* the result was victory, if only for a short while, but ultimately the

monarchy remained. In the sections set in 1885, we see the aftermath of this insurrection, with Italo as a corrupt politician who prefers to read the newspapers from cover to cover rather than actively take part in political life in this brave new world they created. This brings to mind Scurati's description in his essay, *La letteratura dell'inesperienza*, of people nowadays passively watching war and conflict on TV 'sorvegliando birra fresca' (2006: 63). Indeed, in that essay, he describes our modern age as being characterised by a lack of engagement with reality and 'la fine del umanesimo' (2006: 14), which he associates with nineteenth century nationalist ideas.<sup>189</sup> By returning to that time, he seems to be trying to show how these ideas were eroded to arrive at the present situation. Scurati deepens the allegorical layers of the novel also by taking speeches by modern-day tyrannical figures such as Stalin and Bin Laden and putting their words into the mouths of his protagonists. He explains at the end of the text that he does so in order to demonstrate how the issues at stake were the same that we deal with today (564). Indeed, the final sections of the text outlining its citations and intertextual references clearly demonstrate the ways in which *Una storia romantica* moves between past and present, provoking reflection across time periods and recalibrating today's relationship with the past.

Concerns about history and memory can also be seen within the *fabula* at the exhibition about the Risorgimento in the 1885 section. Italo is not able to recognise his real experience in the events that are lifelessly and meaninglessly arranged for tourists' consumption into 'un'agghiacente sincronia' (491). This text seems to be working against such a way of remembering the past; instead of neatly flattening out the Risorgimento, Scurati aims to communicate a real sense of what it was like to live through those momentous events. At the exhibition, crowds of people file through to look at the exploits of those who

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<sup>189</sup> Scurati states that by rejecting such ideas, we are ignoring 'tutto ciò che i padri, gli avi, gli antichi avevano fatto di giusto' (2006: 15), which again draws on ideas about fatherhood.

fought and died, stomping all over this dead and mythologised past and stripping it of meaning in the process; Italo reflects: ‘Quella massa di visitatori alla ricerca della propria identità nella storia [...] avrebbe finito per ridurla a una polvere senza significato’ (494). He ironically observes that this is probably just another piece of entertainment for these visitors ‘tra uno spettacolo di fuochi pirotecnici e una bicchierata in osteria’ (493). Yet, there is far more at stake for a country that has moved away from a dream of complete independence, just as today’s readers can see the need to truly reflect on the past and on their national identity created by historiography, rather than pursuing a romantic idea of history, to play on the words of the title. By attempting to bring something relegated to the history books back alive, Scurati seeks to combat this and close the distance between us and what Ricoeur calls ‘the uncanniness of the historical past’ (2006: 394).

Italo describes the manuscript, aptly entitled ‘La vera storia’, in a way that could be applied to this and other New Italian Epic novels: ‘Era una finzione di tipo diverso [...] a Italo il poter distinguere tra realtà e finzione appariva non soltanto impossibile, ma addirittura irrilevante’ (296). When reading Scurati’s novel, the distinction between ‘vero’ and ‘verosimile’ is generally difficult to detect, although he later goes on to clarify in the ‘Tabula mistificatoria’ the ways in which he amended real historical events, people and places in order to fill any lacunae. He tells us that this hybrid mixture of reality and fiction is his literary vision of a possible truth: ‘ho raccontato le cose non come siamo certi che siano accadute ma *come sarebbero potute accadere*’ (563, emphasis added); this brings to mind Wu Ming 1’s ‘ucronie potenziali’ (2009a: 34). By embellishing on what happened, Scurati reinvigorates a seemingly distant past in a way that speaks to its readers as true, even if it is not an absolute, empirically verifiable truth.

## ***Timira. Romanzo meticcio* by Antar Mohamed and Wu Ming 2**

‘Questa è una storia vera... comprese le parti che non lo sono’. This is the epigraph to Antar Mohamed and Wu Ming 2’s *Timira. Romanzo meticcio* (2012), suggesting another text that aims for Cercas’ ‘third truth’ (2011b). If Scurati’s novel aims to examine a period of history that has been commemorated, in all senses, to death, then the authors of *Timira* conversely choose to examine an aspect of Italian history that has been under-represented by mainstream historiography: Italian colonialism. Scurati’s text can be seen as part of a strand of texts that re-imagine mythologised moments of popular resistance, whereas *Timira*, like Santachiara and Wu Ming 1’s *Point Lenana* (2013), Lucarelli’s *L’ottava vibrazione* (2008), Camilleri’s *La presa di Macallé* (2003b) and *Il nipote del Negus* (2010), or Alessandro Defilippi’s *Le perdute tracce degli dei* (2008), can be seen as part of the postcolonial strand of the New Italian Epic historical novels, which explore the forgotten/overlooked and darker aspects of Italy’s colonial past.<sup>190</sup> Yet, there are several parallels that can be drawn between Scurati’s Risorgimento cut-up and Mohamed and Wu Ming 2’s unusual biography, which also draws on the rich Italian tradition of merging and problematising history and fiction. This problematisation or hybridity, which disrupts and shows the limitations of historical discourse, is particularly well suited to postcolonial reconsiderations of a traditionally Euro-centric narrative of History. When discussing postcolonial approaches to history in fiction, Ashcroft describes a method of political contestation that could be compared to the approach of the New Italian Epic writers: ‘it is one that works through, in the interstices of, in the fringes of, rather than in simple opposition to, history’ (2001: 102).

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<sup>190</sup> We could also add Wu Ming’s *Manituana* (2007b) or Wu Ming 4’s *Stella del mattino* (2008) to this list. Although they do not look at Italy’s colonial history, they both strongly engage with postcolonial ideas: *Manituana* through portraying the Iroquois nation on the eve of the American Revolution, and *Stella del mattino* through the character of Lawrence of Arabia.



Published in 2012, *Timira* tells the life story of Isabella Marincola, a half-Somali half-Italian woman born in 1925, who grew up in Italy under the impression that she was the legitimate daughter of her Italian father and step-mother, before discovering the truth about her parentage. We follow her life, moving forwards and backwards between time planes and locations, from her difficult childhood in Italy, her return as an adult to Somalia to meet her mother, and her flight from Mogadishu during the civil war in the early nineties. The story was based on recorded interviews with Isabella, who was to be the third co-author but died before the text was completed. It is a self-proclaimed ‘romanzo meticcio’, as it is written by Isabella’s son, Antar Mohamed, a Somali exile living in Italy, and Wu Ming 2, an Italian writer with a Chinese name. This mestizo quality is also present in the style of the text, which, like many others of the New Italian Epic nebula, is a hybrid mixture, incorporating letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, official documents, photographs and poems alongside its literary narrative.

As Lombardi-Diop and Romeo have pointed out, Italy has only recently begun to examine its colonial era and the lasting effects it has had on Italian society (2012: 7). *Timira* responds to an urgent need to re-consider the past, in common with the urgency Scurati and others have expressed in re-considering mythologised aspects of Italy’s past like the Resistance or Risorgimento. Isabella’s story shows how one woman’s life can be completely defined by the effects of the Italian colonial project, from growing up as a mixed-race outsider stared at by strangers, to being sexualised as an exotic nude model as a young woman, to belonging nowhere when she has to flee Somalia but is not supported by the Italian state. She reflects that still today in Italy: ‘Se sei italiano e hai la pelle scura, sei una contraddizione vivente’ (449).

Mohamed and Wu Ming 2 do not simply portray the reality of a Somali-Italian woman, but also interrogate Italian colonial memory. We see Isabella as a girl being made to learn the ‘official’ version of the past, pinning Italian flags on the map where important battles were won for control of Ethiopia (90). Later, on returning to Italy in the nineties, she tries to have her brother’s efforts as a partisan who fought and died for Italy officially recognised, but realises that his life has been glossed over – it is ‘una traccia sottile, nella polvere degli archivi. Impronte di formica sopra una lacrima di retorica fossile’ (150) – whereas there is a monument in Mogadishu to the Italian soldiers that died in Somalia. The various archival documents throughout the story also contain reflection on ways of remembering, as in some cases these *reperti*, as they are called, juxtapose different versions of the same event, such as the vitriolic anti-Italian poem written by Timiro Ukash, a poet and militant of the Somali Youth League, preceding the transcript of an Italian newsreel from 1960 describing Somalis and Italians joyfully celebrating Somalia’s independence together (349-350). Like *Una storia romantica* and other New Italian Epic texts, *Timira* thus aims to explore modes of understanding history.

By re-examining national historiography, the authors call into question a version of the past in which Italians still see themselves as having been ‘colonialisti buoni’ (420). In *Timira*’s ‘twin’ (Wu Ming 2013), *Point Lenana*, which also explores Italy’s colonial project in Africa, this ‘pseudo-storiografia’ is framed in more explicit and angry terms: ‘Rassicurazione dopo rassicurazione, cliché dopo cliché, il nostro passato proto-nazionale e nazionale diventa una pappa indifferenziata su cui gli italiani galleggiano da “brava gente”’ (Wu Ming 1 and Santachiara 2013: 15-16). Like Scurati, these writers feel that there is a need to address and dislodge such clichés or accepted truths in order to truly understand the past. Ravagli and Wu Ming state at the beginning of their jointly written historical novel: ‘Le storie non sono che asce di guerra da disseppellire’ (2005: 5), seeming to cast the unearthing

of such stories almost as acts of aggression, or at least in terms of a need to fight against an accepted version of events. This can help gain a better understanding of events happening now too. In *Timira*, we see an attempt to undermine simplistic views on immigrants and colonisation that are held in the present, the views that Antar's girlfriend Celeste expresses: 'che c'entro io se nell'Ottocento sono venuti a casa vostra e vi hanno portato via tutto, e che c'entro io se a Mogadiscio avete deciso di spararvi uno contro l'altro?' (286). The text shows instead how these events are relevant, that they do have something to do with us, tracing back the roots of today's problems to events of the past through the personal lens of Isabella's life story.

A similar approach to colonial history is at work in Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007), in which the main protagonist, Mahlet, comes to understand the importance of listening to people's stories and narrating them to others in order to better understand her native Ethiopia. The stories she narrates in the book take in the Ethiopian resistance to Italian rule in the 1930s to the experience of being an Ethiopian immigrant in today's Italy. When studying in Italy, Mahlet repeatedly hears from Italians that they helped improve her country by building roads and schools, being unaware of the Ethiopian version of what happened (2007: 237). She realises that they will not see themselves from the outside, that they need to look through the eyes of others in order to understand the truth: 'Si sentivano superiori, e non accettavano di guardarsi dall'esterno, con gli occhi degli altri' (2007: 153). Looking at the past and present 'con gli occhi degli altri' is exactly what the New Italian Epic writers seek to do.

Yet they have done so with varying success. Some have criticised the New Italian Epic's attempts to re-examine colonialism, as the texts tend to centre on white, male, Italian experience (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 9). Lucarelli's *L'ottava vibrazione* has

particularly come under fire for not being seen to take a critical enough attitude towards the stereotypes it invokes (Stefani 2010: 51 and Triulzi 2012: 108). Whilst there are defences for Lucarelli's approach, as argued by Sabelli (2013),<sup>191</sup> it is difficult to stomach his exoticising gaze and animalistic depictions of colonial subjects in his re-imagining of the Battle of Adwa, even if his aim was to overturn these tropes of colonial discourse. Another criticism that could be levelled at this strand of New Italian Epic historical novels is that they tend to overlook so-called migrant writing and instead focus on texts written by ethnic Italians, as I outlined in chapter two. In Wu Ming 1's genealogy of the phenomenon in the Memorandum, starting from 1993, he does not acknowledge that the early nineties also signalled the appearance of the first migrant writing in Italian, such as *Io, venditore di elefanti* by Pap Khouma in 1990, or *Lontano da Mogadiscio* by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel in 1994, which, as Burns has argued, could be seen as signalling a new stage in and way of considering literary *impegno* (2001: 159-180) that undoubtedly would have had an effect on the New Italian Epic writers. A similar lack of attention is given to later texts by migrant writers like Ghermandi. *Regina di fiori e di perle* displays many characteristics of the New Italian Epic, but fails to be mentioned in the first version of the Memorandum, and is then relegated to a footnote in later versions (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 13n5). Such omissions are particularly surprising in the light of the New Italian Epic's focus on alternative histories and subaltern subjects, whose voices are largely silent in its corpus.

I would argue that *Timira* is one of the more successful examples of the New Italian Epic texts that look at colonialism and its after-effects. It is not a perfect attempt; here too,

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<sup>191</sup>Sabelli describes the criticisms that Lucarelli does not problematise the stereotypical representations of colonisers and colonised, and of the relationships between the two groups: 'Ritengo invece che siano proprio le relazioni tra i due gruppi, e in particolare le rappresentazioni del colore, del genere e della sessualità, i nodi cruciali su cui si gioca la possibilità di rilevare [...] una prospettiva postcoloniale, che contribuisca a decostruire gli stereotipi razzisti, sessisti e disumanizzanti' (2013). She sees a similar operation in *Timira*, despite its differences as a text.

there is a lack of acknowledgement of the influence from other migrant writers. Specifically, Igiaba Scego is not listed in the final section outlining the text's sources, but her work is clearly an intertextual reference when Isabella says 'la mia patria era l'Italia, mentre la Somalia era la mia *matria* (403), recalling Scego's words in her short story 'Dismatria': 'Il nostro incubo si chiamava *dismatria*. [...] Eravamo dei *dismatriati*, qualcuno – forse per sempre – aveva tagliato il cordone ombelicale che ci legava alla nostra *matria*, alla Somalia' (2005: 11). However, there is a more sensitive investigation of non-white experience in *Timira* than can be found in the work of Lucarelli or Camilleri,<sup>192</sup> for example. This is partly due to the collaboration between an Italian and a migrant writer, as well as its female subject. Wu Ming 2 is deliberately sensitive to his role in the text, saying in a letter to Isabella that he did not wish to colonise her memories, despite originally suggesting that he re-write them in the role of a biographer rather than collaborating equally: 'sono venuto alle tue coste come un europeo d'altri tempi, per trasformare le tue terre nella mia colonia' (344). He recognises that this was wrong and that a joint effort is the best way of addressing their subject matter. He is deliberately self-conscious and self-critical, aware of the fact that his status as a successful, white, male intellectual compromises him ethically to an extent, because it endows him with a certain kind of power, but he attempts to undermine this power precisely by calling the readers' critical attention to it, and inviting them to 'disempower' him, in effect. Moreover, although it was ultimately written by men, *Timira* has what Gargani has called 'la voce

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<sup>192</sup> Camilleri takes two sharply contrasting approaches to the issues surrounding Italian colonialism during the fascist period. *Il nipote del Negus*, inspired by a true story in Michele Curcuruto's *La concessione del telefono*, although very much embellished (as Camilleri explains in the postscript), tells the story of the Ethiopian prince studying in Italy not from his point of view, but from that of various Sicilians involved and through documents (letters, reports, newspaper articles). It has a comic feel, reflecting what Camilleri describes in the notes at the end as 'il clima di autentica stupidità generale, tra farsa e tragedia, che segnò purtroppo un'epoca' (2010: 277). *La presa di Macallé* (2003b), on the other hand, is an extremely disturbing text about a boy called Michelino during the war with Ethiopia, who is exploited or abused by all of those around him, a victim of the same fascist and catholic rhetoric that is used to justify the colonial war. However, in both cases, we can again see the focus on white, male experience that critics have seen as characterising the New Italian Epic's approach to Italy's colonial past.

femminile'.<sup>193</sup> I am borrowing this idea from Re's article comparing Morante's *La storia* – another key precursor to the New Italian Epic historical novels – with Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, whose reading of the two texts is relevant to *Timira* too. This female voice is not dependent on the gender of the writers, but the way in which they represent protagonists at the mercy of a history that has traditionally marginalised and forgotten them. Mohamed and Wu Ming 2 give a powerful sense of this in the text, and do not shy away from women's issues either, as shown by the sexism Isabella is often the victim of, or the harrowing scene of her home abortion (312). They explore issues across gender and race lines and paint a vivid portrait that she collaborated with them to create. There is certainly a sense that, as Wu Ming 2 puts it in one of his letters to Isabella, she prepared the meal with them and they are left to dish it up (346).

Aside from its 'female voice', and its interaction with documentation, the novel is in keeping with the Manzonian/microhistorical model outlined earlier in other ways too. Isabella as an eternal refugee is at the mercy of larger forces throughout her life, displaced from Somalia to Italy, then travelling back to settle in Mogadishu, only to have to flee again. There is in fact a nod to Manzoni in *Timira*, when her departure during the civil war in the nineties ironically echoes Lucia's famous 'Addio ai monti': 'Giunti sulla rotonda del "Kilometro 4", persino la paccottiglia dell'Arco di Trionfo Popolare ti strappa un addio in stile Lucia Mondella' (59). The authors give a strong sense of what it was like to experience historical developments on an everyday level and Isabella, as a mixed race woman in Mussolini's Italy, and later in a society that does not recognise her as Italian, could be seen as the exceptional normal that microhistorical studies tend to focus on; that is, someone seen as an outsider

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<sup>193</sup> 'La voce femminile si caratterizza per un tono che è fondamentalmente quello dell'interrogazione [...] L'eticità della voce femminile risplende nella chiamata che essa rappresenta nei confronti di tutti i segni, tracce, voci che sono state dimenticate e disattese. La voce femminile è il sottotesto che accompagna la storia ufficiale condotta e combattuta dagli uomini armi in pugno' (Gargani 1984: 16).

according to the system of power, but whose story can express something revealing about that very system. Wu Ming 2 strikingly uses a map metaphor when discussing Isabella's story: 'eravamo entrambi convinti che la tua terra avesse diritto a un posto sul mappamondo' (345). This brings to mind Manzoni's topographic map, which would be fleshed out by the private stories of individuals like Isabella.

Indeed, micro- and macro-history are put into sharp relief throughout the text, starting from Wu Ming 2's run-down of historical events that have been happening since he last saw Isabella in his letter that opens the text: 'un anno e mezzo pieno di rivolta e di quello che si usa chiamare la Storia, per poi convincersi che sia un pezzo di carta, o di marmo, e non di vita' (7). This recalls both Manzoni's opening to *I promessi sposi* that evokes 'L'historia' and his similarly ironic reference later in the book to 'Molte cose importanti', quoted earlier.<sup>194</sup> This opening letter from Wu Ming 2 to Isabella also underlines how this historical novel was constructed. Like *I promessi sposi* and *Una storia romantica*, *Timira* foregrounds the way in which it was based on historical documentation, the 'cartelletta rossa' (9) that Antar had brought to Wu Ming 2 eight years before. The documents inside the folder are then presented like clues, listed one by one, but remaining obscure to the reader at this point, marking the beginning of his search to understand her micro(hi)story and bring it to us. In *Timira*, once again, we see the historical operation brought to the fore.

Combined with this commitment to unearth the overlooked aspects of Italy's past, we can detect some elements that could be seen to be postmodern, as shown by its tongue-in-cheek epigraph: 'Questa è una storia vera... comprese le parti che non lo sono'. It is

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<sup>194</sup> We discover in the 'Titoli di coda' at the end of the narrative that it was actually adapted from Carlo Levi's opening words in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*: 'Sono passati molti anni, pieni di guerra, e di quello che si usa chiamare la Storia' (505-6). Whilst Levi's text could provide another interesting precursor for the New Italian Epic exposés of injustice that we will see in the next chapter, Mohamed and Wu Ming 2 explain that it was used in relation to Roberto Derobertis' postcolonial reading of Levi at a conference at the Gramsci Institute in Emilia Romagna in 2010 (506).

reminiscent of Eco's epigraph to *Il nome della rosa* – 'Naturalmente, un manoscritto' (2005) – which gives a similar dual sense of being both literary and based on real evidence.

Mohamed and Wu Ming 2 explain the epigraph in the postscript by saying that they did not aim to depict an absolute truth, but what they call 'più modestamente la verità-di-Isabella' (505). This suggests that, for all the novel's inclusion of real documentation and historical fact, we can only truly engage with history through subjective and 'modest' means. Parts of Isabella's life need to be imagined, such as her journey to Italy as a toddler in the care of nuns. The narrative's lack of authority is frequently underlined, for example in the sections using a second person singular narrative voice, which highlights the role of conjecture: 'Ti immagino in camera, all luce di due candele, davanti all'armadio spalancato e ai cassetti aperti' (43). Wu Ming 2 states in a letter to Isabella that he wanted to link together the episodes she remembers 'col filo del dubbio' (344). Thus, the poetic licence that the authors employed is foregrounded, just as Scurati underlined his insertions of the 'verosimile' into history. Some of the documents included in *Timira* were modified or even falsified, as we find out in the postscript. Isabella's birth certificate (46-7) was reconstructed by combining elements of other documents belonging to her and her brother, as she did not have the original certificate (508), and the extract from Siad Barre's revolutionary speech (382-5) was created from the text of the original with the addition of a final part taken from a longer speech he made only to the armed forces a few weeks later (518). Again, there is a combination of *impegno* with textual experimentation and playfulness, casting doubt on the status of this historical knowledge, which, at the same time, casts doubt on the New Italian Epic's rejection of postmodernism.

*Timira* comes to a close with the filmically titled 'Titoli di coda', in which the authors list the various sources and inspiration that contributed to the writing of the text. Using similar wording to Scurati, Mohamed and Wu Ming 2 explain that this is to encourage



readers to engage with the material and develop the text beyond the pages of the book: ‘grazie ai lettori il testo acquista nuovi significati e genera poi discorso, passaparola, commenti, recensioni, riscritture, trasposizioni’ (503). In their statement: ‘Le storie sono di tutti’ (503), we can find echoes of the final sentence of *Regina di fiori e di perle*: ‘oggi vi racconto la sua storia. Che poi è anche la mia. Ma pure la vostra’ (Ghermandi 2007: 299). These writers see their stories as a community tool, as something to be shared and renegotiated by different readings and approaches, rather than passively absorbed. This extra material does not end with the text itself: as well as the ‘Titoli di coda’, *Timira* has a Pinterest board online containing videos, photos and further information based around the life of Isabella that readers can interact with.<sup>195</sup> *Timira* is part of the same ‘storyworld’ (Ryan and Thon 2014) as the 2008 historical text about Giorgio Marincola’s life by Carlo Costa and Lorenzo Teodonio, *Razza partigiana*, which was made into a theatre performance set to music with Wu Ming 2, later released as an audio CD entitled *Basta uno sparo. Storia di un partigiano italo somalo nella resistenza italiana*.<sup>196</sup> This ‘Progetto Transmediale Multiautore’<sup>197</sup> gives readers the opportunity to assess and digest various accounts of history, rather than simply accepting one version, in an attempt to give the past back the force that Scurati desires.

The internet also played a key role in the construction of the text, as shown by the authors’ references in the final section to their use of tools such as Google Earth, Flickr, YouTube and Facebook in imagining the spaces and people depicted (509). The internet is frequently present throughout *Point Lenana* too, helping Wu Ming 1 in his function as ‘il

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<sup>195</sup> See <http://www.pinterest.com/einaudieditore/timira/>; *Point Lenana* also has a Pinterest board with similar types of extra material: <http://www.pinterest.com/einaudieditore/point-lenana/> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>196</sup> The information for this project is collated on the website [www.razzapartigiana.it](http://www.razzapartigiana.it). See also Wu Ming’s blog *Giap*: <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/?cat=455> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>197</sup> As it is referred to here: <http://www.einaudi.it/speciali/Wu-Ming-2-Antar-Mohamed-Timira> (accessed 07.08.15).

disseppellitore di storie' (Santachiara and Wu Ming 1 2013: 14). His quest to discover who the author of *Fuga sul Kenya* started with: 'La cosa più normale del mondo: digitare "Felice Benuzzi" su un motore di ricerca' (2013: 17). This reflects the way that nowadays we can encounter history in a wider variety of ways than ever, given that from a personal computer it is possible to view film footage, access archives, read documents, or simply encounter straightforward historical accounts. History no longer appears purely as text written by historians, and the advent of new technologies entails 'the co-existing of previously more distinct modes of cultural memory, for instance: the "private" and the "public"' (Hoskins 2009: 101). Recent historical novels like *Timira* and *Point Lenana* reflect this changing landscape of how we access the past, and how anybody can dig up personal or national (hi)stories.

As with Scurati's text, we see in *Timira* the dynamics of cultural memory as described by Erll and Rigney: 'an ongoing process of remembrance and forgetting in which individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past and hence reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites. As the word itself suggests, "remembering" is better seen as an active engagement with the past, as performative rather than as reproductive' (2009: 2). The book performs this reconfiguration by sharing and reflecting on different versions of the past, and encouraging their readers to engage with this memory too. As a *romanzo meticcio*, it combines different types of memory and different forms of discourse, always reminding its readers that it is not a singular, definitive version of history, but a hybrid that poses questions, showing that: 'Qualsiasi narrazione è un'opera collettiva' (504).

The historical novels of the New Italian Epic can be broadly divided into depicting the remembered and the forgotten aspects of Italian history, which *Una storia romantica* and *Timira* represent respectively. Yet they both spring from the same legacy of a distrust of grand narratives, a desire to insert the personal into the collective, and a foregrounding of the ways in which we apprehend the past. They are exemplary of the approaches to history that the other novels of the nebula to various extents also exhibit, merging existing accounts with literary invention, and combining postmodern experimentation with political and ethical commitment. Their over-arching aim is to do what Manzoni imagined his readers demanding of historical novelists: ‘volete che vi dia, non una mera e nuda storia, ma qualcosa di più ricco, di più compito; volete che rifaccia in certo modo le polpe a quel carcame, che è, in così grand parte, la storia’ (1973: 1730). By bringing the past ‘back to life’, they can re-consider it in the light of the present and future.

## ~ CHAPTER FIVE ~

### Literature of Experience

‘Uno spettro si aggira per l’ Europa. È lo spettro di ciò che propongo di chiamare "New Realism"' (Ferraris 2011).

In 2008, the same year as Wu Ming 1’s Memorandum on the New Italian Epic appeared, the online journal *Allegoria* published an issue on the theme: ‘Ritorno alla realtà? Narrativa e cinema alla fine del postmoderno’.<sup>198</sup> It put forward the argument that there had been a return to an engagement with the current reality in film and literature in the twenty-first century (Donnarumma 2008a: 7). Recent work by Italian intellectuals was framed as a reaction against ‘la derealizzazione postmoderna’ (Donnarumma 2008b: 28), what was seen as a postmodernist tendency for narrators to shy away from portraying the present situation and instead rely on inwardness and self-referentiality. Such ideas are not dissimilar to those that we have seen Wu Ming 1 discuss in the Memorandum, where he also referred to realism in the texts of the nebula, but saw it as being combined with epic, allegorical qualities (2009a: 68-72). Donnarumma, however, insists on a postmodernist ‘crisi dell’esperienza’ (2008b: 48), a problem that had been previously discussed at length by Scurati in two *saggi* (2003, 2006), in which he explored the difficulties of having authentic experiences in the highly mediated modern world that Baudrillard has described as hyperreal (1994). Instead of actively participating in what is happening, we are, according to Scurati and others, reduced to being

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<sup>198</sup> See <http://www.allegoriaonline.it/index.php/i-numeri-precedenti/allegoria-n57.html> (accessed 07.08.15).

simply passive spectators in front of our televisions; events such as war have become ‘una realtà deprivata della sua esperienza. Una serata di morte comodamente adagiati sul divano del salotto sorseggiando birra fresca’ (Scurati 2006: 62). This passivity and lack of engagement is what the contributors to *Allegoria* see recent writers as working against, particularly through the use of first-person narratives according to Donnarumma, who states that they have been using their personal subjectivity to combat ‘la disgregazione dell’esperienza’ (2008b: 49) and to denounce the urgent problems facing Italy and the wider world in the twenty-first century.

The assertions in *Allegoria* on this alleged return to reality led to a heated debate, chiefly on the blog *Nazione indiana*, where Cortellessa (2008), among others, took issue with many of the points raised. As he pointed out, many of the writers and film-makers interviewed by *Allegoria* as part of the issue did not subscribe to Donnarumma’s views either;<sup>199</sup> indeed, many of them had what Ganeri (2011) has described as allergic reactions to such labelling of their work.<sup>200</sup> Yet despite such controversy, the issue of *Allegoria* also marked the beginning of a series of studies based around the subject, such as Ferraris’ *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* (2012), and various edited volumes: *Tirature ’10. Il New Italian Realism* (Spinazzola 2010), *Notizie della post-realtà* (Santoro 2010), *Finzione cronaca realtà* (Serkowska 2011), and *Negli archivi e per le strade. Il ritorno alla realtà nella narrativa di inizio millennio* (Somigli 2013).<sup>201</sup> This indicates that *Allegoria*’s issue 57

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<sup>199</sup> To mention a few of those writers who were most strongly opposed to the idea: Genna: ‘Non parlerei di “ritorno alla realtà”’ (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008: 12); Lagioia: ‘Il concetto di “ritorno alla realtà” applicato alla letteratura, a mio parere non ha senso’ (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008: 16); Trevisan: ‘al contrario: credo si possa parlare di fuga dalla realtà’ (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008: 23).

<sup>200</sup> Ganeri’s controversial conclusion is that such a strongly negative reaction to an alleged return to reality is indicative of the fact that these intellectuals have their own inward-looking and self-referential way of talking to one another instead of engaging with the wider world (2011: 67-8).

<sup>201</sup> It is worth mentioning that Casadei had already started exploring ideas about recent literature’s approach to reality before issue 57 of *Allegoria* in *Stile e tradizione nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo* (Casadei 2007), and, even before that, Siti had spoken about ‘un realismo d’emergenza’ in an interview (Simonetti 2003).

brought to the fore a need to describe what was happening both within Italy and further afield, a tendency that was labelled *Reality Hunger* by David Shields in his 2010 text.

This chapter begins by unpicking the various strands of this debate to interrogate the approaches of Donnarumma, Scurati, Wu Ming and others to what has been called ‘new realism’. It will also analyse the relationship between text and reality in the light of the digital age, and trace the origins of hybrid mixtures of fact and fiction. It will then focus on a close reading of two texts that fall under the category of investigative journalism as it is employed by these New Italian Epic writers, and consider the implications of considering such work to be ‘neo/realist/ic’. In *Gomorra*, although being held up as the archetypal return to reality by *Allegoria*, Roberto Saviano relies heavily on fictionalising his exposé of the Neapolitan mafia known as the Camorra. Babsi Jones takes the conflicts in the Balkans as her subject matter in *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, exploring the possibilities and limitations of the writer as witness. Whilst both Saviano and Jones come up against the difficulties of relaying the ‘truth’ about their realities, they also find ways to document experience in today’s world without ignoring the tensions of postmodernity. In doing so, they seek to combat the shortcomings of the mainstream media on their subject matter, and use their personal and subjective gazes to communicate political messages.

### **Reality, Representation, Reportage**

The description of the return to reality in *Allegoria* contains both fruitful observations and erroneous assertions about the climate of twenty-first century Italian literature. Aside from substantial reservations about the putative end of postmodernism, which I have

discussed in detail earlier (see chapter one in particular),<sup>202</sup> I would also point out that the writers of the articles in *Allegoria 57* and other critics discussing the topic problematically tend to conflate and to use with little theoretical grounding ideas such as ‘realtà’, ‘realismo’, ‘realistico’ and ‘reale’. It is difficult to dissociate realism from the conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, which, as we shall see, are certainly not present in these texts. Moreover, as Cortellessa argued (2008), the concept of the ‘Real’ has been shown to be unreachable and problematic since Lacan. Along similar lines, Nove pointed out in his interview in *Allegoria*: ‘Dopo Freud, dopo lo strutturalismo e dopo Lacan parlare di realismo in buona fede mi sembra impossibile senza accettare che si tratta della convenzione di un’altra *fiction*’ (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008: 19). At times, the ‘ritorno alla realtà’ is also understood by those interviewed as a return to neorealism, which the film-makers overwhelmingly reject (as pointed out by Taviani 2008: 86). Genna expresses a similar feeling that this debate seems in many ways outdated, stating that these questions of how literature can influence reality ‘si poteva porre negli anni cinquanta a Vittorini, esistente il Partito Comunista Italiano’ (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008: 14).

This lack of theoretical clarity could go some way towards explaining the opposition expressed by those interviewed on the proposition of a return to reality, which on closer examination of the articles is less controversial than it would initially seem. The issue seems not to be devoted to discussing mimetic realism, and indeed Donnarumma makes a distinction towards the end of his article between what he is discussing and (what he again slightly vaguely terms) ‘un realismo di scuola’ (2008b: 54). Rather, he describes the restoration of a dialectic between realism and modernism that was interrupted by

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<sup>202</sup> It is particularly questionable here that Donnarumma uses examples such as Saramago and Houellebecq to illustrate this end of postmodernism (2008b: 26). Texts like Saramago’s *Todos os nomes* (*All the Names*) and Houellebecq’s *La Carte et le Territoire* (*The Map and the Territory*) seem to me to be concerned precisely with postmodernist issues related to knowledge and meaning, at times employing the irony and playfulness often associated with postmodernism.

postmodernism: ‘Gli scrittori che si impongono dagli anni Novanta, in un certo senso [...] dimostrano come fra realismo e modernismo, fra volontà di parlare del mondo e consapevolezza autoriflessiva della letteratura esiste una conciliazione produttiva’ (2008b: 27). He does not ignore tensions in trying to portray a reality that can be problematic and elude representation, but one that he believes needs constant interrogation to gain meaning through literature (2008b: 54). Neither does Vicari subscribe to ‘un realismo di scuola’ in his article, instead underlining the strongly subjective nature of recent film-making, which he feels would require referring to the depiction of plural realities rather than one reality (2008: 78). Taviani describes this return to reality in a way that similarly does not overlook the complexities of realism today: ‘Si può (si deve) stare addosso alla realtà [...] *raccontando una storia*, attraverso uno sguardo personale che non esclude il ricorso all’ibridazione dei generi’ (2008: 87). She does not advocate a return to neorealism either, but puts forward the view that these recent narrators and film-makers have been influenced by a neorealist heritage, and are thus ‘Riallacciando il filo con i Padri’ (2008: 90). In terms of the New Italian Epic, this reference to paternity resonates strongly with the issues discussed in chapter three, and, indeed, the insistence on ideas of return surrounding the debate on ‘new realism’ could be understood in terms of a desire for a return to order after the waywardness of postmodernist experimentation, which could once again be read psychoanalytically. Overall, instead of advocating a classically (neo)realist mode, the authors of *Allegoria 57* seem to be saying, in common with Wu Ming 1 in some ways, that there has been a renewed sense of *impegno* among intellectuals, who have sought to engage with the present situation in Italy. They are doing what Donnarumma describes as ‘pronunciamento sui temi della vita pubblica’ (2008b: 44), which is certainly true of the New Italian Epic writers.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> There are interesting parallels between the current climate in film criticism and that of literary criticism in Italy: as O’Leary and O’Rawe (2011) have pointed out, the term ‘realism’ tends to be used to endow films with value and seriousness, and we can see a similar operation happening in literature. There are also comparable



It is, however, difficult to subscribe to Donnarumma's and Scurati's conception of a crisis in experience in the modern world, or what Giglioli (2011) has characterised as a lack of trauma. Scurati opens *La letteratura dell'inesperienza* contrasting precisely the fertile neorealist literary explosion after the Second World War with the climate facing his literary generation (2006: 10), making the sweeping statement that, nowadays, 'l'idea del futuro è divenuta oscena, il culto del passato perversione macabra, l'umanesimo letterario un'idea estinta' (2006: 14). In *Senza trauma*, Giglioli links his ideas to those of Scurati – 'In quella che Antonio Scurati ha chiamato l'età della compiuta "inesperienza", la realtà si dissolve tra le dita di chiunque voglia raccontarla' (2011: 15) – and he attributes recent Italian writers' unease about the relationship between literature and the world to the fact that they live without conflict on home soil: 'Niente più guerre qui da noi, carestie, epidemie, conflitti religiosi' (2011: 8). For Scurati and Giglioli, this generation seems to be waiting for a watershed moment to happen so they can write about it as writers like Calvino and Vittorini were able to do in the post-war years. Donnarumma expresses comparable ideas, although he takes this beyond the Second World War to the *anni di piombo*. In his discussion of the constant return to the sixties and seventies that is particularly present in recent *noir* fiction, he states: 'Dal tedio del presente, quel passato acquista il colore dell'età degli eroi, dei grandi intrighi, della possibilità di essere dentro la Storia come protagonisti o vittime, anziché come semplici spettatori' (2008b: 37). There is a similar sense of missing a crucial moment and being relegated to an inability to actively participate in something meaningful in the twenty-first century.

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anxieties about more popular or 'lowbrow' texts involved in the discussion of realism in film: 'The privileging of cinema's allotted role of "mirror" of the nation has led to a downgrading of popular genres and a kind of nationalistic cinema history in the scholarship. Questions of the popular, or indeed an anxiety about the status and *appeal* of the popular, have occupied a permanent place at the heart of Italian film history' (O'Leary and O'Rawe 2011: 109). In a similar way, *Allegoria 57* could be interpreted as an attempt to elevate contemporary literature in the face of those critics, such as Ferroni (2010), who have condemned it as mindless entertainment.

Scurati's view of the period following the Second World War as being superior to the situation today is limited. As Burns has argued, the post-war conception of *impegno* quickly fragmented, but literary work thereafter was by no means bereft of a sense of political and ethical commitment. Starting in the sixties, there was both an 'erosion of faith' in the role of politically committed literature, but also 'freedom from the stylistic straitjacket of neorealism' (Burns 2001: 37). Therefore, a return to the characteristics of this post-war period would not necessarily be a positive development. Seeing it as a golden age implies viewing it through the lens of a 'good old days' mentality, suggesting that Scurati is displaying nothing more than a nostalgia for a time when writers were not necessarily better off than they are today. Casadei rightly questions Scurati's views on the myth of the experience of war, and points out that 'già in passato l'esperienza diretta non costituiva il *primum* dei racconti', making the point that Tolstoy was narrating events in *War and Peace* that had happened before he was born (2007: 25). This also brings us to a clear shortcoming in Giglioli's text, that is the role of what Hirsch has called 'postmemory', the transmission of memories of traumatic events that took place before your lifetime.<sup>204</sup> The symptomatic return to the Second World War and the *anni di piombo* by recent Italian writers is testament to the enduring power of events that have not been directly experienced. Jansen points out that, rather than the desire to hear extreme stories in the absence of lived experience that Giglioli describes, we can detect in texts like Janeczke's *Lezioni di tenebra* – which is specifically referenced by Hirsch (2013: 204) – and her *Le rondini di Montecassino* 'un autentico bisogno di "guarire" dal trauma e di trovare una dimensione comune' (2012).

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<sup>204</sup> 'Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right [...] It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past but their effect continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation' (Hirsch 2013: 205-6).

Scurati's particularly apocalyptic descriptions of what a highly mediated reality has done to cognitive experience also need interrogating. He draws heavily on Baudrillard's work, particularly in *Televisioni di guerra. Il conflitto del Golfo come evento mediatico e il paradosso dello spettatore totale* (2003). In this text, Scurati describes the passivity of a television audience watching war unfold:

Trasformandola in spettacolo, la Tv inquadra la guerra nella cornice di una finzione generalizzata. La principale conseguenza di questo slittamento semantico dalla realtà alla finzione è che, di fronte ad un'azione negata nella sua effettività, ci si può limitare ad assistere (2003: 13).

As Somigli points out, anxiety about the role of television in our lives now seems somewhat dated in the light of the internet age, and he states that we are fully able to distinguish 'tra reality e realtà, tra immagini di guerra di un film e immagini di guerra dall'altro capo del mondo' (2013: xiii). Perhaps Scurati's aversion to television could be part of the tendency among these writers and critics to reject postmodernism, television being seen as the postmodernist medium *par excellence*. Casadei rightly points out that an alleged loss of experience risks becoming 'un mito (post)moderno', and that, although we have lost some types of direct experience, we have also gained others through more complex forms of perception (2007: 26). Antonello highlights the fact that television has become more sophisticated in recent years, offering new narrative possibilities and, rather than being a passive activity, can be educational and constructive (2012: 84-5). The fact that texts such as *Romanzo criminale* and *Gomorra* have been made into hugely successful and high quality television series further calls into question television as the *bête noire* of writers today.

Indeed, in the twenty-first century, reality might be highly mediated, but this has led to a world in which people are more connected and empowered to comment on events, in

some cases effecting change, in what Jenkins has described as a convergence culture (2006a). Viewers/users nowadays have developed a sophisticated understanding of the techniques and tropes of recreating realities of various kinds on screen, and they may well be creators of such images themselves on personal devices. They are likely to be informed and self-aware, rather than passive spectators. Hayles has convincingly made the case for the presence of human materiality in the era of technology, despite the growing role of simulation theorised by Baudrillard. She states: 'If simulation is becoming increasingly pervasive and important, however, MATERIALITY is as vibrant as ever, for the computational engines and artificial intelligences that produce simulations require sophisticated bases in the real world' (2002: 6). Many of the technological advances affecting literature, such as online collaborative writing, fan fiction and hypertexts are precisely based on interactions between writers and readers in the real world, always relating back to a materiality and connectedness that have not disappeared since the digital revolution, but have arguably strengthened. Antonello has described a common mistrust of, and failure to engage critically with, mass media among Italian intellectuals, aside from a few exceptions such as Eco (2012: 69). Eco astutely identified an artificial binary in pitting the humanist novel against the barbaric mass media, and instead foresaw a rhizomatic, collective intelligence resulting from interactions with the mass media in his text *Apocalittici e integrati* (1988). In terms of the writers analysed in this chapter, we will see that they employ transmediality to develop their written texts, connect more closely with their readers and push them to engage with their stories. Antonello sees Eco's 'nomenclatura di massa' as finally becoming possible through social networks and new technologies, which are free from a central controlling ideology, as Eco predicted (2012: 96). We must be wary of being too optimistic when discussing cultural changes as a result of the digital age, as I outlined in the introduction to this study. However, despite some drawbacks

to the internet environment, it is difficult to see today's world in Scurati's and others' apocalyptic terms.

Scurati's answer to what he perceives to be a crisis in our relationship with reality is to write historical novels (2006: 77), in order to exit what he sees as an eternal present – another postmodern myth, as I analysed in the previous chapter – whereas Donnarumma and Giglioli see first-person narratives as the counterpoint to our everyday lack of experience, which the latter believes explains the popularity of books like *Gomorra* (2011: 61). However, many of the New Italian Epic texts that can be associated with the so-called 'new realism' – *Gomorra*, *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, Siti's *Il contagio*, Janeczek's *Cibo*,<sup>205</sup> much of Genna's work – are highly fictionalised first-person narratives, autofiction rather than autobiography, or what Siti in *Troppi paradisi* calls 'autobiografia di fatti non accaduti' (2006: 2). In an interview with Genna (2007c), Jones quoted William S. Burroughs, who stated of his work: "Every word is autobiographical and every word is fiction" (quoted in Morgan 1988: 539). If readers see this as approaching reality as closely as possible, they would certainly be mistaken. These works could in fact be described using the epigraph to David O. Russell's 2013 film *American Hustle*: 'Some of this actually happened'. We will see that, whilst Saviano engages with the ambiguities of real and fictional experience under the surface of his text, Jones particularly brings to the fore meditations on the difficulties of representation and her narrative's unreliability. This suggests that these first-person narratives

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<sup>205</sup> Wu Ming 1 states that *Cibo* is not in fact part of the New Italian Epic phenomenon although it approaches and anticipates it (2009a: 44n37). However, he does not justify this statement further, and I see no reason to discount it, in that it is certainly an unidentified narrative object containing striking changes of tone and genre, has a strong sense of *impegno*, and looks at its subject matter with a 'sguardo obliquo'. Janeczek examines her eating habits and those of people she meets in her everyday life in order to reflect on wider points related to history, gender issues, and the politics surrounding the BSE epidemic. As Wu Ming 1 points out, Janeczek's work also undoubtedly influenced Saviano and she is also his editor (2009a: 44); it is difficult, therefore, to exclude her from the nebula.

are more complex than a simple desire for something ‘real’ to engage with, but indicate, once again, a combination of postmodernism and *impegno*.

This sense of *impegno* often comes from an emotional engagement, in contrast to more traditional forms of *impegno*.<sup>206</sup> Focussed through the first-person and on individuals, these texts seek emotion through communicating experience and asking readers to identify with it. Yet, simultaneously, they call for an investment of imagination by not insisting on the reliability of the author/witness, which also caused many of the anxieties surrounding the reception of these texts, as we shall see. Thus, the experience examined in this chapter can be material/embodied or imagined/linguistic or mixtures between them.

The importance of embodiment in their texts and across media for Jones and Saviano – and Genna, as we saw in chapter three – again recalls recent Italian feminist theory by Braidotti, Cavarero and Muraro, and their emphasis on the ethical importance of embodiment. Muraro calls for what Ronchetti describes as ‘la *contrattazione* tra il linguaggio e ciò che *chiede di essere riconosciuto come esistente*: corpo, desiderio, vissuto, esperienza’ (2009: 104). As I have discussed elsewhere, feminist concerns do not tend to enter into the New Italian Epic discussion, but there are striking and fruitful parallels in considering them, not only in terms of fatherhood as we saw in chapter three, but also in relation to the life writing in the nebula. Muraro’s negotiations between language and life are what are foregrounded in the texts analysed in this chapter, and we will see Jones in particular seeming to allude to feminist principles about communicating embodied experience.

Genna pointed out in his interview in *Allegoria 57* that these questions about how to narrate reality are also similar to those that were being asked of writers like Tom Wolfe and

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<sup>206</sup> Mosca also notes this change from previous forms of commitment, stating: ‘ciò che oggi più sembra contare non è l’unicità stilistica, o la complessità e raffinatezza della composizione, ma la capacità della narrazione di comunicare emotivamente al lettore una verità umana e storica’ (2014: 165).

Norman Mailer in the sixties (Donnarumma and Policastro 2008: 13). Indeed, there are fascinating echoes between the discussions surrounding the role of Italian literature in the twenty-first century and those that greeted the beginnings of New Journalism – which, not coincidentally, ‘constitutes one of the varieties of postmodernism’ (Jameson 1991: 56). Wolfe described New Journalism’s mixture of reportage with literary techniques as being part of a search for a new way to reflect the contemporary reality: ‘So help me, this is the way people live now!’ (1975: 68). The insistence in the twenty-first century on moving away from the classical novel form has a similar drive to engage with the present world, in which some feel that pure fiction ‘has become culturally irrelevant’ (Siegel 2010); Philippe Forest has asked: ‘Un roman est-il possible aujourd’hui?’ (‘Is a novel possible today?’) (2007: 53, my translation); Will Self has proclaimed ‘The novel is dead (this time it’s for real)’ (2014); and Shields has said of the unself-conscious contemporary novel: ‘it’s not clear to me how such a book could convey what it feels like to be alive right now’ (2010: 71). Although the playing field has changed somewhat in recent years due to technological developments, there are unresolved tensions related to ideas about truth and authenticity that writers continue to wrestle with in a similar way to their counterparts in the sixties and seventies. These recent Italian writers’ desire to go beyond what they see as a lack of political and ethical engagement in postmodernist narratives echoes the New Journalists’ reaction against the lack of realism they perceived in the neo-fabulists (Woolfe 1975: 56). Just as New Journalism was greeted by accusations of being dishonest – ‘*The bastards are making it up!*’ (Wolfe 1975: 24), or as Gore Vidal famously said of Capote, ‘Truman made lying an art form’<sup>207</sup> – and written off as not being highbrow literature (Woolfe 1975: 52-3), so too has *Gomorra* come under fire for its unstable truth status, as we shall see, and the New Italian Epic corpus has

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<sup>207</sup> He provocatively added to this: ‘a minor art form’ (as quoted in Vespa 1979).

been relegated to what Ferroni has labelled *Scritture a perdere* in his 2010 text.<sup>208</sup> We have seen that the New Italian Epic demonstrates continuity with postmodernist experimentation; at times, this is specifically with a combination of journalism with literature, and the associated blurring of the lines between fiction and nonfiction, that American New Journalists in many ways pioneered forty or fifty years ago.<sup>209</sup>

Yet, the so-called return to reality is not simply an Italian version of New Journalism, as Mosca rightly argues (2013: 162-3). He points out that the return to reality is not born of a shared theoretical position, but is rather a spontaneous phenomenon, and the attitude of these Italian writers towards the relationship between reality and fiction is not as straightforward as it was for the New Journalists, but rather problematised, as shown by the narrators' responses in the interviews in *Allegoria* 57. I would add that this problematisation is further demonstrated by Siti's comments on the topic of realism in a 2003 interview, when he stated: 'Se io non riesco a possedere la realtà, dimostrerò allora che la realtà è un "effetto gnoseologico", un'invenzione culturale, e che non la può possedere nessuno' (Simonetti 2003: 161). Mosca also makes the salient point that there is a clear break in these recent Italian texts with both 19<sup>th</sup> century realism and the non-fiction novel associated with New Journalism in that they do not have a third person narrator to guarantee the narration's objectivity (2013: 163). Wolfe likens New Journalists precisely to their 19<sup>th</sup> century counterparts: 'You see journalism learning the techniques of realism – particularly of the sort found in Fielding, Smollett, Balzac, Dickens and Gogol' (1975: 46); this comparison does not

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<sup>208</sup> Ferroni specifically takes against the New Italian Epic for what he sees as its lack of the characteristics of epic and the texts being 'giocati su una scrittura neutra e priva di respiro o su artifici esteriori e ripetitivi' (2010: 40). However, he goes on to analyse what he sees as the positive qualities of works such as Siti's *Il contagio* (Ferroni 2010: 91-2) and Saviano's *Gomorra* (Ferroni 2010: 93-6), which are New Italian Epic texts specifically mentioned by Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum (2009a: 15), as well as elsewhere associated with the phenomenon.

<sup>209</sup> Indeed, Wu Ming 1 mentions New Journalism and the nonfiction novel in the Memorandum as the beginnings of the widespread tendency to mix fiction and nonfiction that has led to texts like *Gomorra* today (2009a: 91-2), but states that: '*Gomorra* non è importante perché fonde letteratura e giornalismo, fiction e non-fiction: quello lo fanno in molti. *Gomorra* è importante per come lo fa' (2009a: 92).



hold up when discussing these Italian examples. Recent Italian writers seem to be searching for new forms to engage with what they see as a changing, problematic, postmodern reality, and, in doing so, employ what Wu Ming 1 calls ‘sovversione “nascosta” di linguaggio e stile’ (2009a: 37) that is far from mimetic realism.

Moreover, hybrid mixtures of fiction and non-fiction have a tradition in Italy that goes further back than the non-fiction novels associated with New Journalism.<sup>210</sup> I return, again, to Manzoni, as I did in the previous chapter, although in this case to his investigation into the miscarriage of justice surrounding the torture and execution of the *untori* accused of spreading the plague in ‘Storia della colonna infame’. I hazard that this essay must have not only influenced later works like Sciascia’s *L’affaire Moro* (1978), but also the more recent exposés of the workings of power and injustice associated with the New Italian Epic.<sup>211</sup> This includes the texts analysed in this chapter, but also Janeczek’s appendix to *Cibo* (2002) on the BSE epidemic, Carlotto’s *noir-ish Perdas de Fogu* (2008) written with the collective Mama Sabot about the harmful effects of military testing in Sardinia, Lucarelli’s *Misteri d’Italia* (2002), Evangelisti, Genna, Wu Ming and others’ *Il caso Battisti* (2004),<sup>212</sup> Nove’s *Mi chiamo Roberta, ho 40 anni, guadagno 250 euro al mese* (2006),<sup>213</sup> or Scurati’s *Il bambino*

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<sup>210</sup> Again, Mosca makes a similar argument, pointing to a tradition ‘da Manzoni a Borghese, da Moravia a Pasolini, fino ai recentissimi Franchini, Desiati e Saviano’ (2013: 159).

<sup>211</sup> D’Angelo also draws a line from Manzoni to the ‘ritorno alla realtà’, tracing similar tensions or ‘nevrosi’ as he calls them, in the relationship between reality in fiction for Manzoni and for writers like Siti and Saviano (2013: 197-207).

<sup>212</sup> The editorial board of *Carmilla* decided to compile articles, reflections and background history on the controversial case surrounding the attempted extradition of Cesare Battisti, a writer who had allegedly taken part in violent acts during the *anni di piombo*, was tried and condemned *in absentia*, and took refuge in France. With contributions from various writers associated with the New Italian Epic, also including De Michele, the text unravels what Wu Ming 1 refers to as ‘tutte le storture, i vizi di procedura e i nodi irrisolti del periodo dell’emergenza’ (Evangelisti *et al* 2004: 17).

<sup>213</sup> As I discussed in chapter two, Nove is not strictly a New Italian Epic writer, but his inclusion in the interviews in *Allegoria 57* and his move from being associated with the *giovani cannibali* in the nineties to writing literary reportage about the conditions of the modern working world means that he is not out of place in this discussion. His text interweaves the individual stories of a variety of workers with his own thoughts about twenty-first century Italy, in order to collect unwritten, forgotten stories and paint a picture of what he calls ‘la nostra era. La nostra storia’ (2006: 59). Pellini points out that, in a similar move to Saviano in *Gomorra*, Nove chooses to counteract the neutral testimony of his interviewees with his personal, subjective narrating ‘I’ (2011:

*che sognava la fine del mondo*, in which Scurati seems to refer to ‘Storia della colonna infame’ when describing the spread of gossip about the paedophile ring in Bergamo he is investigating: ‘Il tempo delle voci, della diceria dell’untore, sarebbe venuto poi’ (2009: 115). Manzoni’s work, first published in 1840 and, like Janeczke’s ‘epilogo morale’ (2002: 231), originally an appendix to a longer fictional work, incorporated the tools of fact with those of fiction. The result could be called an ‘unidentified narrative object’ and would pave the way for later writers’ *inchieste* combining history, reportage and literary techniques. Manzoni’s depiction of ‘cose che in un romanzo sarebbero tacciate d’inverisimili’ (1987: 837), despite its clinical examination of historical documentation, also relies on vivid, emotive descriptions of the experiences of its protagonists and rhetorical questions to draw in its readers. Through necessity, Manzoni had to resort to conjecture at times when the facts were silent, for example about the meeting between Piazza and the auditor; he points out: ‘Quello che passò in quell’abboccamento, nessuno lo sa, ognuno se l’immagina a un di presso’ (1987: 873). And indeed he goes on to imagine what happened, reflecting on Piazza’s possible psychological state as he struggled with what to do, a description embellished with vivid detail. Manzoni asks rhetorically before answering his own question: ‘chi può immaginarsi i combattimenti di quell’animo, a cui la memoria così recente de’ tormenti avrà fatto sentire a vicenda il terror di soffrirli di nuovo, e l’orrore di farli soffrire!’ (1987: 873). It is precisely a writer like Manzoni who can imagine such things, just as Sciascia could read and interpret the strange events surrounding Moro’s kidnapping and death from a different standpoint, uncovering hidden meanings and offering insights that are at once ‘politiche, psicologiche, psichanalitiche’ (Sciascia 1994: 184).

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159). The text also has a transmedial quality, as it led to a spin-off theatre production with actors and musicians interpreting the original text (see Nove 2011).

Another Italian writer speaking of endemic corruption in politics when journalists would not do so, despite not having all the evidence at his fingertips, famously stated:

Io so. Ma non ho le prove. Non ho nemmeno indizi.

Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore, che cerca di seguire tutto ciò che succede, di conoscere tutto ciò che se ne scrive, di immaginare tutto ciò che non si sa o che si tace; che coordina fatti anche lontani, che mette insieme i pezzi disorganizzati e frammentari di un intero coerente quadro politico, che ristabilisce la logica là dove sembrano regnare l'arbitrarietà, la follia e il mistero (Pasolini 1974).

This belief in the writer's ability to assemble and make sense of reality's 'pezzi disorganizzati e frammentari' is precisely what many of the writers of this journalistic 'new realism' feel they have the privileged ability to do, and, like Pasolini, or Sciascia or Manzoni before him, this only partly relies on proof or *indizi*. Significantly, we shall see that Pasolini's famous statement is echoed and modified by both Saviano and Jones, and it also resurfaces in Genna's *Dies irae*.<sup>214</sup> We can thus trace Italian writers over time who combine evidence with conjecture, to try to understand human motivations, and arrive at Cercas' 'third truth' (2011b) that I discussed in the introduction to this study. They write what Scurati describes in a note at the beginning of *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo*, in another nod to Manzoni, as 'comпонimenti misti di cronaca e d'invenzione' (2010).

These Italian texts are not unique in their mix of fact and fiction, although such unidentified narrative objects seem to be particularly widespread in Italy. There are myriad

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<sup>214</sup> Genna interweaves fictional and autofictional stories around an investigation into the conspiracies surrounding death of Alfredo Rampi in the 80s in Vermicino (mentioned in chapters two and three). When the textual Genna goes to Vermicino towards the end of the text, he moves from asserting his knowledge about these events – 'Io so. /So parti, pezze, tracce perse nella polvere poco più avanti' (2014b: 637), 'So quel che so' (2014b: 638) – to realising 'Non è vero che so: io non so. [...] io non so e so che non so' (2014b: 639). He is thus closer to Jones' unstable relationship with knowledge than to Saviano's assertions of his authority, as we shall see.

examples of comparable works in the contemporary literary landscape. I would argue that crossovers between literature and journalism have become increasingly common, with novels frequently co-opting reportage – as Pellini also points out (2011: 148) – and newspaper features tending towards being literary in tone. Besides Cercas’ work mentioned earlier, a few examples of recent journalistic unidentified narrative objects beyond Italy’s borders are: *On Bullfighting* (1999) by A. L. Kennedy, which opens with her own suicide attempt to explore how bullfighters risk death for a living, *Windows on the World* (2003) by Frédéric Beigbéder, which weaves stories and reflections around the 9/11 terrorist attacks in an attempt to make sense of them, or *Zeitoun* (2009) by Dave Eggers, which reconstructs the story of one man during Hurricane Katrina.<sup>215</sup> These texts freely employ poetic licence in their investigations, often incorporating autobiographical elements too. Like the New Italian Epic unidentified narrative objects, their authors choose to use the tools of fiction in reporting on real events to more strongly communicate their message and involve their readers. Saviano states that the difference between literature and journalism is not a question of style or subject matter, but that literature is unique in ‘questa possibilità di creare parole che non comunicano ma esprimono, in grado di sussurrare o urlare, di mettere sotto pelle al lettore che ciò che sta leggendo lo riguarda’ (2009: 241); other writers seem to be of a similar view about the power of fiction.

Moreover, such texts are often attempts to combat a lack of information in the mainstream media about the issues they address. Pilger says of the twenty-first century: ‘There is a surreal silence today, full of the noise of “sound-bites” and “grabs” of those with power justifying their deception and violence. [...] Never has there been such a volume of repetitive “news” or such an exclusiveness in those controlling it’ (2004: xxvii). The use of a

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<sup>215</sup> For a fascinating discussion of more examples from Italy and elsewhere, see Mosca 2014.

combination of investigative journalism and fiction can work against this and, their writers hope, make a difference by making jaded readers sit up and listen. The multiplicity of such unidentified narrative objects can thus be seen as a symptom of a need for other voices even in twenty-first century convergence culture. In Italy, this culture of disinformation is felt more keenly given Berlusconi's power over the telecommunications sector through his company Fininvest, which has been a source of concern for many writers.<sup>216</sup> Not coincidentally, Wu Ming started as part of the Luther Blissett project engaging in media pranks, to unmask the limitations in the ways in which the press and television report information.<sup>217</sup> We have also seen the limitations in the media in the way in which the events at the G8 in Genoa were reported (see chapter two). Mosca (2009) points out that there has been a sense of a need to bridge the gap between literature, which was seen to have disengaged with real events, and journalism, which was seen as lacking in depth and in need of a more critical analysis of events. By combining the two, these writers can use their unidentified narrative objects to create 'un nuovo patto con il lettore, chiamato di volta in volta a farsi toccare da ciò che legge, e coscientemente decidere di prolungare gli effetti della lettura anche al di fuori dei ristretti confini del privato' (Mosca 2009: 322).

We also cannot overlook the role of the many enduring *misteri d'Italia* in these combinations of fact and fiction. Significantly, there was a renewed interest in 'Storia della colonna infame' in the twentieth century, as Manzoni's portrayal of a political and judicial system that could falsely condemn people without rooting out widespread corruption seemed

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<sup>216</sup> Antonello believes Berlusconi's media power has been overstated and used, particularly by the left, to avoid taking responsibility for the political situation (2012: 80). However, Re takes issue with this assessment (2014: 106-7), citing Ginsborg's description of Berlusconi's and Fininvest's strategies from 1994 as 'the most ambitious and successful attempt so far to combine media control and political power' (Ginsborg 2005: 10). At least the perception that his media control has adversely affected the situation in Italy does seem to have galvanised writers to enter the public arena and make their voices heard, particularly those associated with the New Italian Epic.

<sup>217</sup> For a detailed analysis of Luther Blissett's various pranks, see Deseriis 2011.

to be particularly relevant. In the eighties, in the aftermath of the scandals of the *anni di piombo*, Dionisotti said of *Storia della colonna infame*: ‘il malgoverno denunciato dal Manzoni, è piaga vecchia e mai rimarginata della società italiana, così nel Seicento come, *mutatis mutandis*, nell’Otto e nel Novecento, nell’età del Manzoni e nella nostra’ (1988: 248). Equally, this could be seen as remaining relevant today in twenty-first century Italy. Dionisotti points out that Manzoni was ‘uno scrittore privo di titoli legali, ma forte del diritto che l’uomo ha di fare storia, senza riguardo al privilegio alcuno’ (1988: 248); so too are the recent writers I mentioned above, or before them Sciascia or even Ginzburg in *Il giudice e lo storico*.<sup>218</sup> There is a long Italian tradition spanning back to Manzoni of the intellectual as a figure who can scrutinise injustice, assuming the role of a detective or investigator, to re-write the accepted (hi)story, yet always with a literary sensibility, as we shall see too in the cases of Saviano and Jones.

Overall, the texts related to the so-called return to reality are not indicative of a straightforward move from anti-realist/unrealistic postmodernist experimentation to neo/realist/ic *impegno*, but instead demonstrate elements of, and crossovers between, all of these components. They explore interactions between reality and fiction, between testimony and journalism, between technology and tradition, and between different media. This is more complex than a simple shift from one mode to another; it is rather rhizomatic and characterised by a range of interactions, as these writers both push literature forward and

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<sup>218</sup> Although Ginzburg is not a writer, he is a historian who similarly felt he could apply himself to a question of (in)justice, employing the mix of evidence and conjectures that were typical of his work. He says of such conjectures in his exposé that they are sometimes necessary in order to fill gaps when we are discussing human life: ‘queste integrazioni sono possibilità, non conseguenze necessarie; congetture, non fatti accertati. Chi arrivasse a conclusioni diverse negherebbe la dimensione aleatoria e imprevedibile che costituisce una parte importante (anche se non esclusiva) della vita del singolo’ (1991: 108). Manzoni, Sciascia and these more recent writers seem to have a similar attitude to the role of poetic licence in trying to understand people’s motivations and bring to light a hidden truth about real events.

draw on what came before. The results make for unusual, interesting and even uncomfortable reading.

### ***Gomorra* by Roberto Saviano**

The ‘libro in questione’ chosen for issue 57 of *Allegoria* was *Gomorra. Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra*. Saviano's first-person account of the nefarious influence of the Neapolitan mafia known as the Camorra, ostensibly springing both from his investigative journalism and personal experience, was seen as a prime example of the return to reality. The text was a sensation when it was first published in 2006, as many Italians were unaware of the extent of the corruption and violence that was taking place in Naples and its surrounding areas (Pocci 2011: 245-5). By far the most widely read, well-known and written about text associated with the New Italian Epic, *Gomorra* made Saviano a celebrity, both at home and abroad, where the text has been translated into many different languages.

The text centres round the micro-stories of various people the narrator encounters in and around Naples. These are fragmented, everyday stories of people who work for or are affected by the Camorra, including himself, with frequent moments of poetic licence, as we shall see. Yet, they also open up to wider points about Italian and indeed global issues. Wu Ming 1 points to the impressive, epic scope of the text: ‘il viaggio inizia al porto di Napoli e nelle trascurate periferie di quella città, ma poi Saviano ci porta in Russia, Bielorussia, Scozia, Stati Uniti, Spagna, in Medio Oriente, a Hollywood, in Columbia... Lo sguardo di Saviano fa incursioni in tutto il mondo, perché la criminalità organizzata italiana fa affari in tutto il mondo’ (2009b: 114). Tricomi states that what *Gomorra* reveals is not only the

workings of the Camorra ‘system’, but of the entire global economic system: ‘per il lettore che fermi il proprio sguardo in *Gomorra* come dentro un cannocchiale, la prospettiva si allarga immediatamente’ (2008: 190). This image is particularly apt when applied to *Gomorra* and, indeed, to many of the New Italian Epic texts: whilst we seem to be looking at one object, the lens opens out to show a much more wide-ranging view. There are shifts from the local to the global as we see the micro- and macro-dimensions of the subject brought into relief. Saviano strongly communicates a sense that the Camorra is not simply an Italian problem and draws all of its readers into its portrayal of a Foucauldian, or postmodern,<sup>219</sup> net of power.

The text seemingly aims for a greater level of realism than other portrayals of both the mafia and the situation in Naples. Saviano considers existing filmic representations of organised crime, highlighting the influence of the cinema industry on the behaviour of the Camorra in the ‘Hollywood’ section of *Gomorra*: whether it is the clan boss Walter Schiavone’s house modelled on that in *Scarface* (267), Cosimo Di Lauro dressing like Brandon Lee in *The Crow* (274), or the lasting effects of Tornatore’s *Il camorrista*<sup>220</sup> on the imaginary of organised crime in Naples (275). However, he also portrays the phenomenon in deliberately stark contrast to these familiar visions, insisting instead on the grim truth of organised crime. This is shown most clearly by the deaths of two micro-characters Giuseppe

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<sup>219</sup> In his text *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson makes specific mention of *Gomorra*, which he sees as expressing the way in which postmodernity works through Saviano’s descriptions of the clans’ neoliberal approach to business and economics. They are portrayed as criminal entrepreneurs who ‘replicate the system of late-capitalist economic production’ (Jameson 2009: 361). He sees *Gomorra* as illustrating the following point: ‘Postmodernity, then, as an historical stage of capitalism which includes everything from the labor on the ground to the form and thoughts and fantasies in people’s heads, constitutes a dominant ideological patterning system which forms a structural limit to all our superstructural as well as infrastructural realities’ (2009: 362-3).

<sup>220</sup> Tornatore’s 1986 film opens with words that indicate a similar sense both of *impegno* and of a relationship between fiction and reality that is characterised by tensions: ‘Gli autori non hanno preteso fare ricostruzioni storiche e tanto meno imporre come “verità” una loro versione dei fatti ma con l’elaborazione fantastica di quelli avvenuti e con altri di pura immaginazione, tentare in autonomia creativa un affresco contro la violenza e la sopraffazione, con la speranza che della visione del film lo spettatore tragga ulteriori motivi per credere nella insostituibilità della legge dello Stato, unico e vero presidio del vivere civile’.



and Romeo, whose fate is described with allusion to the mafia films the boys had so admired: ‘Lasciarono che le mani dei cadaveri dei ragazzini fossero beccate dai gabbiani e le labbra e i nasi mangiucchiati dai randagi che circolavano sulle spiagge di spazzatura. Ma questo i film non lo raccontano, si fermano un attimo prima’ (280). Saviano both interacts with popular mythology and overturns it, refusing to stop his recording of events in an attempt to work against the tendency of the cinematic gaze to glorify or sensationalise organised crime.

Previous representations in film may have fallen short of exposing the truth about the mafia, but so have representations in the media. Saviano portrays other journalists in *Gomorra* as underestimating the situation in Naples, ‘dove si credeva esistessero ormai solo bande e sciappatori’ (136), and as being more interested in conveying ‘[l’]estetica della suburra napoletana’ (139) than unearthing the truth. They keep their distance from the action, only getting involved once it is over: ‘I giornalisti erano appostati nelle loro macchine. Ma soltanto dopo aver lasciato fare [...] iniziarono a riprendere il blitz’ (95). They are even tricked by officials into photographing ‘poliziotti in borghese che si fingono pusher’ (138). The narrator, on the other hand, is among the gangs and drug pushers, riding across town on his Vespa and observing murder scenes. He displays a strong sense of urgency to delve into his subject matter, going undercover at great risk to get under the skin of the Camorra. It has been widely publicised that Saviano had to go into hiding and has lived under police protection due to his fight against organised crime. There is a clear danger in what he does in the text, as he attempts to distance his work from other approaches to this subject matter and get closer to the reality in Naples.

Given such a desire to expose this reality, it is perhaps surprising that he chooses a highly literary and subjective style. On opening the text, we encounter a description of the port of Naples, alternatively described as ‘una ferita’ (12), ‘il buco nel mappamondo’ (12),

‘un ano di mare che si allarga con grande dolore degli sfinteri’ (14), ‘Un’appendice infetta mai degenerata in peritonite’ (16) and ‘Un anfibio di terra, una metamorfosi marina’ (16). This abundance of metaphors – what Pellini calls ‘incontinenza metaforica’ (2011: 150) – is not what a reader would immediately associate with reportage, or a text with an overt aim for greater realism. Casadei points out the widespread use of bodily comparisons here and elsewhere in the text, stating:

La percezione corporea costituisce il mezzo per non sentire lontano e distante quanto viene visto – i crimini di ogni tipo che potrebbero risultare mero spettacolo, da trattare con indifferenza, o diventare base per un teorema astratto, per una ricostruzione razionalmente e logicamente ineccepibile, e tuttavia inapplicabile alla realtà effettuale (2010: 115).

As discussed earlier, this also suggests a bodily engagement, which we will see in Jones’ text too. Casadei argues that this bodily element in *Gomorra*, combined with the presence of Saviano as witness, was why the text had such an effect on its readers, more so than Franchini’s *L’abusivo* (2001) or Balestrini’s *Sandokan* (2004), which were published around the same time, examined similar subject matter, and merged fact and fiction, but lacked the emotional power of Saviano’s text (2010: 107-111).

Indeed, after these descriptions of the port, the narrative then moves very quickly to Saviano’s narrating ‘I’: ‘Al porto ci andavo spesso per mangiare il pesce’ (17). Throughout the text, this ‘I’ partly serves to legitimise his occasionally rather far-fetched narration, part of what Casadei calls a ‘processo di “autenticazione”’ (2010: 110), as if to show that he ‘really’ did experience these things, but also seeks empathy by drawing us into his personal story. His experience of the Camorra did not start with the writing of this text, but in his childhood, as is evident from the way in which memories interact with what he relates. When describing a

crime scene he tells us: ‘La prima volta che ho visto un morto ammazzato avrò tredici anni’ (112). Later, when he introduces the story of Don Peppino Diana, a priest who was killed by the Camorra after speaking out against them, he starts with his personal recollection of the day of Don Peppino’s funeral: ‘Avevo sedici anni [...] Mi svegliò mia zia, come sempre, ma con una violenza strana [...] non disse niente e camminava facendo un rumore fortissimo, come se sfogasse tutto il nervosismo sui talloni’ (241). He also describes how his father, a doctor, was beaten up by the Camorra for helping a boy who had been shot: ‘Per i successivi quattro [mesi] non riuscì a guardare in faccia nessuno’ (190). Saviano’s childhood and his family have been personally affected by the violence he depicts in the text, and he uses these stories to invite deeper emotional identification from his readers. Saviano himself, then, is the main micro-story of *Gomorra*, appearing in almost every paragraph of the text, yet these autobiographical elements are included in order to explore collective issues. His own experience of the Camorra adds to the power of what he says, showing the way in which organised crime affects everyone who lives in the Naples area. As with the other New Italian Epic writers’ use of autobiographical elements, we can see what Wu Ming 1 describes as ‘introspezione e autofiction per narrare un fatto pubblico e “storico”’ (2009a: 15n9).

In including so many personal elements, Saviano casts himself as something of a hero, both intra- and extra-diegetically. Within the text, his crusade to expose the truth at all costs is mirrored by the character of Don Peppino Diana. Saviano strongly aligns himself with this heroic figure, who uses the power of the word, ‘Tenendo sulla punta della lingua lo strumento, l’unico possibile per tentare di mutare il suo tempo’ (251). This mirroring manifests itself on a textual level too in the way in which the narrator quotes from Don Peppino Diana’s text condemning the Camorra – entitled ‘Per amore del mio popolo non tacerò’ (244) – whilst giving his own running commentary alongside it, weaving his own words into the priest’s to bind the two of them together. Don Peppino Diana’s condemnation

echoes the rhetorical quality of much of Saviano's text, using accumulation and repetition to hammer home what he is saying and, as the narrator states, it demonstrates 'Una fiducia nella possibilità di azzannare la realtà' (250).

Outside of the text, Saviano has employed different media to further communicate his message in what Jenkins' would call 'content streaming', a shift 'from media-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels' (2006a: 243). He writes newspaper articles on similar subjects, does frequent interviews, has made a television series entitled *Vieni via con me* dealing with Italian social issues, has created a website, regularly posts on Facebook and tweets to his approximately one million followers. He was also involved in creating Garrone's 2008 film adaptation of the text and the Sky television series starting in 2014. This means, as Pocci points out: 'Saviano has become not only a public figure but a living symbol, nationally and internationally, of the intellectual actively and directly involved in the fight against organised crime' (2011: 225). Dal Lago is more damning in his assessment of this phenomenon, caustically referring to 'Santo Saviano' (2010: 106), and arguing that he absolves the state of responsibility by framing his fight against organised crime in absolutist, moral terms, as demonstrated most clearly by *Gomorra*'s biblical title, as well as the title chosen for Saviano's collection of essays, *La bellezza e l'inferno*.<sup>221</sup>

Certainly there are limitations to Saviano's heroic and self-sacrificing approach to the evils of organised crime, not only due to the danger it has put him in. Yet, *Gomorra*'s huge success has undeniably increased awareness about the issues raised, and has arguably fulfilled Saviano's stated aim: 'quello di incidere con le mie parole, di dimostrare che la parola letteraria può ancora avere un peso e il potere di cambiare la realtà' (2009: 15).

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<sup>221</sup> Dal Lago argues that Saviano portrays himself as a hero combatting the 'male assoluto' of the Camorra (2010: 19), and states: 'minimizzando di fatto l'implicazione dei poteri pubblici, locali o nazionali, nel crimine organizzato, Saviano perviene non solo a una sorta di esaltazione romantica e anti-storica della lotta contro i criminali come gesto *morale*, ma anche a un'assoluzione di principio del potere statale' (2010: 20).

Moreover, Cortellessa rightly points out that Saviano's pronouncements about *Gomorra* have gradually mutated, from a more circumspect attitude to the truth status of his book on its publication,<sup>222</sup> to recasting it as 'una battaglia di verità' (2011a: 510-511). Cortellessa suggests that this could be linked both to the strong identification he has experienced from readers and to the threats he has received from the Camorra, forcing him to leave behind both his home and the realms of literature (2011a: 511). If we peel away the various layers surrounding *Gomorra*, ranging from hagiographic portrayals of Saviano, with some calling for him to win the Nobel Peace Prize, to their polar opposite, criticism that he has been irresponsible and, at times, dishonest, we have a book that has been widely read,<sup>223</sup> and that has renewed discussion about the issues surrounding organised crime and corruption in Italy.

Saviano's personal and emotive approach is both what his detractors have seized on and what also arguably makes the text so successful in gaining its readers' attention.<sup>224</sup> He chooses to focus on various characters related to the vast network of the Camorra's activities and furnishes his readers with real or imagined details to bring them to life. Gallippi makes the point that this is what distinguishes the characters in the text from the faceless victims of the mafia that we encounter in newspaper reports (2013: 511). Saviano's narrator often focusses on seemingly minor, human details – such as the fact that Don Ciro, one of the *sottomarini* who distribute monthly allowances to the wives and girlfriends of imprisoned *camorristi*, has 'i baffi gialli, laccati dalla nicotina così come l'indice e il medio della mano

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<sup>222</sup> See his interview with Giovanna Zucconi in *La Stampa* on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2006, in which he states that he wrote the book 'senza ossessione di verità', and describes the narrator's gaze as 'un io congetturale e deformato' (quoted in Cortellessa 2011a: 526).

<sup>223</sup> Even in the culturally barren holiday resort portrayed by Genna in *Italia De Profundis*, the narrator observes: 'le madri stanno *tutte* leggendo *Gomorra* di Roberto Saviano. Se Roberto sapesse dove finisce il suo libro, dopo quello che gli è costato...' (2008: 266). However, Genna's opinion seems to be closer to that of Dal Lago about the efficacy of Saviano's success, as the narrator comments later: 'Se *tutte* stanno leggendo *Gomorra*, si può avere l'illusione di vivere in un Paese civile. Invece è il contrario. La letteratura è penultima' (2008: 293).

<sup>224</sup> This is also Casadei's argument: although recent texts like Franchini's *L'abusivo* and Balestrini's *Sandokan* had examined similar subject matter, the first-hand witness in *Gomorra*, the use of fictional techniques taken from the *poliziesco*, and the portrayal of the motivations of the various 'characters' captured the public's attention (2010: 107-111).

destra' (155) – which again seems to work against traditional mafia narratives and more straightforward reportage. These are small, simple, almost banal details of people who do not spend their lives killing or on the run, but simply operate in a web of organised crime. Saviano's words in a speech reveal the visceral quality of what he aims to do with such writing: 'la letteratura mette paura al crimine quando ne svela il meccanismo, ma non come accade nella cronaca. Fa paura quando lo svela al cuore, allo stomaco, alla testa dei lettori' (2009: 197). As Mosca says of Saviano, Siti and other recent writers' work: 'non solo il testo vuole informare il lettore, ma soprattutto toccarlo nell'intimo, forzare la sua emotività fino a fargli considerare il fatto narrato come *qualcosa che lo riguarda*' (2013: 167).

Near the beginning of *Gomorra*, we meet Pasquale, an impoverished but highly skilful tailor working for the Camorra, whose disappointment at seeing Angelina Jolie sporting one of his creations leads him to quit and become one of the Camorra's truck drivers instead. The narrator imagines how he must still think of his success, in a passage that gives an insight into Saviano's liberal use of poetic licence to embellish his narrative with more 'realism', and to invite identification through fictionalising:

Sono sicuro che Pasquale, da solo, qualche volta, magari quando ha finito di mangiare, quando a casa i bambini si addormentano sfiancati dal gioco a pancia sotto sul divano, quando la moglie prima di lavare i piatti si mette al telefono con la madre, proprio in quel momento gli viene in mente di aprire il portafogli e fissare quella pagina di giornale. E sono sicuro che, guardando quel capolavoro che ha creato con le sue mani, Pasquale è felice. Una felicità rabbiosa. Ma questo non lo saprà mai nessuno (46-7).

The narrator's repetition of 'sono sicuro che' asserts a certainty that does not exist for such imagined details. He is both insisting on this certainty but at the same time flagging up the

role of literary imagination in his narrative. He does this again at various points throughout the text, such as his flight of imagination about how another couple affected by the Camorra, Gelsomina and Gennaro, first met: ‘Se mi fermo e prendo fiato riesco facilmente a immaginare il loro incontro, anche se non conosco neanche il tratto dei visi’ (98). When he describes Giuseppe and Romeo’s last moments, he starts from what facts we have about them, and then uses what Chimenti describes as a ‘a literary operation as a springboard – to throw the reader into a reality’ (2010: 47). This is indicated by phrases such as: ‘Me li immaginavo sui motorini tirati al massimo’ (279), or: ‘immagino la scena che hanno raccontato i giornali’ (279). Again, there is a combination of painting a verisimilar picture of his protagonists and simultaneously underlining the fact that it is based on personal conviction more than objective evidence. The phrase that most clearly emphasises what type of knowledge he is offering us in imagining the young boys’ thoughts when they met their end could be applied to many aspects of the stories recounted in *Gomorra*: ‘sono sicuro di una certezza che non potrà mai avere alcun tipo di conferma’ (279-280). As he suggests in the final sentence of the passage on Pasquale – ‘Ma questo non lo saprà mai nessuno’ (47) – nobody can *know* such things, just as Manzoni could not know all the details about the trial of the *untori*, or Sciscia could not know about Moro’s mental state, but they believe that their research combined with their imaginings as writers have weight.

In the position of Saviano’s narrator, there are clear echoes of Pasolini’s ‘io so’; Saviano is speaking out, even if he has to rely on his imagination at times in order to expose what he sees as the truth. He also explicitly references Pasolini when he goes to visit his grave, although, like other recent writers, this reference actually complicates Pasolini’s legacy, as Antonello also points out (2012: 119-123). At the grave, Saviano becomes angry thinking of all these things that he knows about the Camorra’s activities, and turns Pasolini’s famous words around, repeatedly maintaining ‘Io so *e ho* le prove’ (233-240, emphasis

added). Saviano uses Pasolini to demonstrate a sense of *impegno* that could cost his life, rather than engaging with his emphasis on ‘il problema del rapporto tra verità storica e il suo carattere testimoniale e probatorio’ (Antonello 2012: 120). He manipulates Pasolini’s words to insist on the truth status of what he is narrating: ‘Io so e ho le prove. E quindi racconto. Di queste verità’ (234). This is despite assertions, indicated above, that parts of the text are based on his imagination, or other instances in the text when he less openly fabricates elements of his narration. His description of the funeral of Annalisa Durante has particularly come under fire from others who were also present and have disputed various aspects of his testimony (as pointed out by Dal Lago 2010: 59-61, Pucci 2011: 230 and Policastro 2008: 188). Saviano changes or adds details without openly declaring it to the reader, such as Annalisa’s friends ringing her mobile phone that is lying on her coffin as it is carried out of the church: ‘Squilla sul feretro: è il nuovo requiem. Un trillo continuo, poi musicale, accenna una melodia dolce. Nessuno risponde’ (173). This embellishment, like those added to the stories of Pasquale or Giuseppe and Romeo, adds to the pathos of the scene, the funeral of a teenage girl who had nothing to do with the Camorra, and, yet, died at their hands.<sup>225</sup> Although in many cases Saviano does offer up ‘proof’ – figures, statistics, quotations from intercepted phone calls – in other cases, he either does not have such proof or chooses to move away from facts into fiction. It is significant that, in contrast to some other New Italian Epic texts, *Gomorra* does not have a reference section at the end, or a bibliography, and that the film and television series based on the text are not documentaries, but fiction. Saviano may try to move away from Pasolini’s words to make ‘l’io so del mio tempo’ (233), but the knowledge or truth on which *Gomorra* is based is frequently purely literary, gaining power not from cold evidence,

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<sup>225</sup> Dal Lago argues that other modifications, such as the descriptions of Annalisa and her friends, rely on stereotypes to satisfy potential readers, and he sees Saviano’s use of invention when he could have used real details as inappropriate: ‘Va bene che la letteratura è finzione, ma il lutto andrebbe rispettato, soprattutto quando è reale’ (2010: 61). Dal Lago, as a sociologist and not a literary scholar, insists on adhering to a nonfictional mode that seems to misunderstand what kind of text *Gomorra* is.



but from poetic licence and the writer's passion to bring these things to light, as was the case for Pasolini.

Another important precursor to *Gomorra*, which similarly calls into question the newness of the 'realism' that Saviano is engaging with, is Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. In an essay in which Saviano describes what he so admires about Herr's exposé on the Vietnam War, we can see parallels with what he wanted to do in *Gomorra*. Herr can be associated with the New Journalism discussed earlier, and many aspects of *Dispatches* arguably make it an unidentified narrative object, in which the author mixed fact and fiction to say something about the Vietnam War that the then mass media were ignoring. It worked against the mythology surrounding what Herr refers to as 'movie-fed war fantasies' (1978: 157), just as Saviano seeks to break open Hollywood stereotypes of the mafia. Herr felt that his subject matter somehow required a new form to address it; as he states in the text: 'Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it' (1978: 175). Along similar lines, Jameson says of *Dispatches*: 'This first terrible postmodernist war cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie – indeed, the breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms is, along with the breakdown of any shared language through which a veteran might convey such experience, among the principle subjects of the book and may be said to open up the place of a whole new reflexivity' (1991: 44-5). This whole new reflexivity, rooted in postmodernity, is what Saviano and other New Italian Epic unidentified narrative objects search for too. Like these texts, *Dispatches* is a collage or cut-up of literary and pop culture references, memoir, reportage, splices of conversation and fragmentary images of lived experience. Saviano imagines a moment in which Herr must have decided to abandon objectivity and rigorous distance in his account of the conflict: "“Chi se ne frega. Non mi interessa se sbaglio [...] Racconto come funziona, racconto il puzzo delle scarpe coi piedi marciti dentro”" (2009: 175). This is exactly what

Saviano himself does in *Gomorra*, diluting facts with vivid and emotive description to truly bring home to the reader what is happening, to communicate postmodern experience.

What is also relevant about Herr's text is the fact that it is not simply about the Vietnam War, but foregrounds the experience of being a war reporter, just as Saviano, and Jones, as we shall see, foreground their experiences in investigating their subject matter. Saviano says of Herr: 'trascina il lettore in guerra' (2009: 174); this is precisely what Saviano does too. He feels that one needs to be thrown into things in order to fully understand them, telling us of his decision to follow the war in Secondigliano: 'comprendere significava almeno farne parte. Non c'è scelta, e non credo vi fosse altro modo per capire le cose. La neutralità e la distanza oggettiva sono luoghi che non sono mai riuscito a trovare' (86). Santoro emphasises the narrator's belief in direct observation of events in *Gomorra*, calling it 'un vero e proprio pathos della presenza' (2010: 41). This statement could also be applied to Herr's need to go to Vietnam, and also to Jones' narrator, although Santoro surprisingly overlooks Jones' text. It is difficult not to think of *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* particularly in what Santoro goes on to say about Saviano offering 'il proprio corpo e il proprio sangue alla parola, rendendola materia in modo da mordere la realtà e il lettore' (2010: 41). Experience, in an age that is supposed to be one of inexperience, is what these writers insist on, to add power to what they describe and to take their readers with them, even if the journey – indeed, Saviano calls his text a *viaggio* in its subtitle – is not necessarily into events precisely as they happened.<sup>226</sup> Antonello suggests that Primo Levi could be seen as

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<sup>226</sup> In Saviano's follow-up to *Gomorra* about the global cocaine trade, *Zero Zero Zero* (2013), the hands-on experience that made his debut so memorable and powerful is missing, due to the difficult conditions under which Saviano must now work. There is a poignant reminder of this in the dedication at the beginning: 'Questo libro lo dedico a tutti i carabinieri della mia scorta. Alle 38.000 ore trascorse insieme. E a quelle ancora da trascorrere'. It is once again a stylistically unusual text, which moves between Mexico, Columbia, Calabria, Russia, and all over the world, but Saviano is only present in the occasional asides that document his obsession with the drugs trade: 'Scrivere di cocaina è come farne uso. Vuoi sempre più notizie, più informazioni, e quelle che trovi sono succulente, non ne puoi più fare a meno. Sei *addicted*' (2013: 417). He must stay in hiding, accessing the facts second hand, through Wikileaks and the Guardian (2013: 335), documentaries on the History

another model, in combination with Pasolini, for twenty-first century *impegnati* writers (2012: 123). Saviano certainly has Levi's drive to testify and tell others of what he has witnessed, although he has a tendency to more or less openly invent elements of his testimony as we have seen. As we shall see in the case of Jones too, Levi is a relevant reference point for attempting to communicate extreme experience, but this is more experimental in the New Italian Epic texts, which deliberately blur fiction and non-fiction.

These texts can be described as performative, in two senses: in their writers constructing and performing an identity as protagonists in their own texts, and in their 'actional force [...] to involve the readers, ethically and emotionally', as Pocci describes in relation to *Gomorra* (2011: 240).<sup>227</sup> This also springs from the transmedial quality of *Gomorra*, as Saviano's drive to unmask corruption has taken many forms beyond the pages of the book, where he has used different platforms to raise awareness about these issues and encourage readers to engage actively with the text's content. The use of diverse media has again had a double performative function: of contributing to the creation across multiple platforms of what Dal Lago critically labels 'il mito contemporaneo' (2010: 22) surrounding the figure of Saviano, and of engaging readers, as part of Jenkins' bottom-up participatory culture (2006a).

The 'actional force' of *Gomorra* also partly springs from its generic hybridity, which, as Wu Ming 1 points out, reaches uncanny heights (2009b: 110). Wu Ming 1 divides readers of this text into two groups: inattentive readers, who simply take it to be a straightforward mafia exposé, and attentive readers, who realise that what they are encountering is something

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Channel (2013: 329), or, as one reviewer perhaps unkindly points out, lifting them from Wikipedia (Varese 2013).

<sup>227</sup> Pocci's perceptive reading of *Gomorra* employs Austin's theories on the constative and performative function of language, showing the text's 'constative effect of *corresponding* to the reality under examination (the reality of the *camorra*) in an assertive rather than descriptive mode, and the performative one of *responding* to such reality with expressive force and brave civil engagement' (2011: 243).

uniquely powerful, asking questions such as: ‘Dove diavolo era Saviano per aver visto questa roba? Chi è l’io narrante? [...] Sto leggendo un reportage giornalistico o sto leggendo un romanzo travestito da reportage giornalistico?’ (2009b: 113).<sup>228</sup> Once the latter group come to terms with the uncanniness of what they are reading, they can better understand Saviano’s message and engage with the text, taking an active role in interpreting it.

The section on the Kalashnikov is typical of the unsettling fusion of genres we see at work in *Gomorra*. It opens with an elusive description of Saviano running his finger around something that eventually transpires to be a bullet hole from an AK-47, leading on to a brief history of the weapon complete with facts and figures. Spliced into the narrative is his recollection of bumping into his estranged father with his new family, provoking personal thoughts about their relationship: ‘Mio padre mi guardò con la solita delusa espressione, come dire che ormai neanche scherzando mi avrebbe sentito dire ciò che avrebbe voluto ascoltare’ (187). This is subsequently interrupted by a flashback to his childhood, when his father was beaten up by the Camorra. Then there is the apocryphal account of Mariano, a *camorrista* and gun enthusiast, going to Russia to meet the inventor, supported by a narration of what he filmed on his camcorder in Michail Kalashnikov’s house: ‘Il video saltava, le immagini si agitavano, i volti ballavano, le zoomate deformavano occhi e oggetti, l’obiettivo sbatacchiava contro pollici e polsi’ (192). The jumping around and skewed angles of this video are inscribed onto the narrative of this section. It is exemplary of Saviano’s desire to ‘wake up’ his readers through a combination of elements that require different types of reading and reflection.

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<sup>228</sup> Interestingly, this is reminiscent of Eco’s ‘lettore ingenuo’ (2005: 525), discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Scurati’s *Una storia romantica*, again showing an affinity with Eco.

What we encounter in *Gomorra* is unquestionably distinct from other reading experiences. Wu Ming 1 has said of the New Italian Epic: ‘E’ imperativo depurarsi, cercare di vedere il mondo in altri modi, sorpendendo noi stessi’ (2009a: 81); Saviano’s vision certainly achieves this. Overturning the norms is, of course, deliberate on Saviano’s part. He has said of the text in an interview: ‘Volevo essere “bastardo” perché sapevo che questa materia, se non fosse stata trattata in un modo diverso, sarebbe rimasta relegata o negli ambiti del genere *thriller*, o cose del genere, o nella saggistica, per così dire, più specialista’ (quoted in Pucci 2011: 243). It is clear that Saviano made a conscious decision to produce a text that would not be easily categorised in order to increase awareness of the on-going tragedy in Campania using any genre at his disposal. Benedetti particularly stresses the importance in *Gomorra* of avoiding the limitations of conventional genres, because if the text is something recognisable ‘non potrà essere percepito come qualcosa di significativo in sé, come una ribellione o una sfida’ (2008: 180). This sense of rebellion is encapsulated in the final sentence of the text, which brings together the personal element of Saviano’s crusade with the directness of the text’s challenge to the Camorra and an immediacy that cannot but engage the readers: ‘Maledetti bastardi, sono ancora vivo!’ (331).

### ***Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* by Babsi Jones**

Like *Gomorra*, which appeared a year before it, Jones’ text is a response to what the author perceives to be shortcomings in public knowledge about her subject matter. *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* (2007) depicts the seven days she spent as a reporter in Mitrovica in Kosovo, during violent clashes between Serbs and Albanians, although this ‘quasiromanzo’ (255) is more broadly about the ongoing conflicts in the Balkans, and the way in which other countries, and in particular ‘quell’Europa smemorata’ (45), have turned a blind eye to what

has been happening. She narrates what happens in Mitrovica, in what she calls ‘Tempo reale’,<sup>229</sup> alongside periodic flashbacks to some of the narrator’s other experiences in the former Yugoslavia, as well as to incidents in history as far back as the 14th century that help explain how they arrived at this situation. Despite her constant reflections on her inability to truly represent the situation, Jones’ narrator has a similarly strong sense of *impegno* to bring her readers’ attention to what has been happening – ‘come se io fossi l’ultima Cassandra disponibile’ (27) – but manages to avoid the rhetoric of heroism that can be detected in Saviano’s text.

*Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* centres loosely round letters that the narrator is ostensibly sending to her boss at the newspaper she is reporting for. She directly addresses her interlocutor as ‘Direttore’, imploring him to hear her words. Like Saviano, she puts herself at great personal risk in order to find out what is going on, getting into the thick of events in order to let others know about them, and ideally, although perhaps, she realises, not realistically – she is more circumspect than Saviano in this – effect change through the power of her words. She tells us: ‘non ho vissuto in questo pogrom, ho *scritto*. E ogni giorno, con l’illusione di cambiare qualcosa, qualsiasi cosa, ho afferrato una matita e ho ricominciato’ (199). She too fights against the official version of events, undermining those who speak of ‘i liberatori [...] i delegati [...] è finita la guerra’ (42), NATO’s rhetoric of ‘albanesi dentro, serbi fuori’ (111), and an unscrupulous press that puts the speed of circulating news above its veracity (52).<sup>230</sup> Although these events are taking place on foreign soil, she also shows their

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<sup>229</sup> Although she does not openly state when this ‘Tempo reale’ is, we can assume she is referring to the events that began in March 2004 in Mitrovica, when the drowning of an Albanian child in the river sparked violence between the city’s Albanians and Serbs.

<sup>230</sup> Interestingly, De Michele (2009) has compared Jones’ depiction of the way in which the first piece of news about an event is what counts, even if it is later disproved, to the way in which people reacted to the violent events at the G8 in Genova: ‘Su Genova, sulla sua “interpretazione”, c’è una battaglia di verità che è stata di fatto persa: la prima versione, quella televisiva e governativa, si è imposta nell’immaginario nazionale. Per l’italiano medio Genova era percorsa da orde di Black Bloc che devastavano a destra e a manca, Carlo Giuliani stava assaltando un furgone dei carabinieri, le forze dell’ordine sono state costrette a difendersi. Come ha spiegato Babsi Jones decostruendo la strategia informativa che ha costruito a priori la legittimazione della guerra

relevance to Italy, highlighting her country's involvement in the NATO bombings in 1999, even though the Direttore prefers her to focus more on the drama of the violence and deaths than on the uncomfortable truth of how they happened, seeming to support Mosca's observation (2010), discussed earlier, that the Italian press tends to shy away from critical depth. The narrator asks him: 'non hai il desiderio di sapere *come* accade, quel che accade in Serbia a causa dei *nostri* bombardimenti, Direttore?' (189). This is what she wants to know, as she uncovers the truth about the illegal cluster bombs that were used, rather than simply adhering to the sort of stories the rest of the press prefers, what she labels 'una mitologia da supermarket' (189).

Part of this fight against such mythology is the way in which the narrator constantly attempts to bring the readers into her experience, to make us breathe the air she breathes, as well as see what she sees, in the same vein as Saviano. Like the narrator of *Gomorra*, she resorts to intertextuality to more clearly illustrate what she encounters, seeking identification from her readers through references to films – *Dogville* (152), *Matrix Reloaded* (147), *Apocalypse Now* (203) – or other literary texts – the work of Kerouac (83), Büchner's *Woyzeck* (110), Joyce's *Ulysees* (166). There is also frequent interference from other media, whether it is the songs that find their way into the narrative through being played in the background (16-17, 23, 203), or the slogans of advertisements on the radio (237-8). This gives the narrative a sense of immediacy, as the reader takes in the cacophony of layers that make up this reality. At one point, the narrator differentiates between the work of a war reporter who, similarly to Saviano's journalists, stays at a safe distance from the action in a comfortable hotel, and a writer like her: 'Il percorso dello scrittore è diverso [...] le sue frasi

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contro la Serbia (l'annunciato bombardamento di un mercato, smentito nel giro di pochi minuti dalla stessa emittente che aveva dato per prima la notizia), *il primo lancio di agenzia è quello che conta*. Genova è stata un macello. È stata un omicidio a sangue freddo. È stata, anche, un esperimento mediatico: la balcanizzazione dell'informazione'.

affiorano lentamente, come ascessi; il tempo per ripensarle, nelle stanze scelte a caso, di notte, è un tempo rischioso; parola per parola per parola per parola: una monotona emorragia semantica mi consuma' (65). These are her words of blood from the frontlines.

The text's title is based on a quote from *Hamlet* – 'O, from this time forth, /My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!' (act IV, scene IV, 65-6) – although the translation into Italian raises different possible meanings. She may be exhorting her words to be bloody, or 'know' of blood, or even 'taste' or 'smell' of blood, bringing to the fore the visceral quality of her writing, which is comparable to how Saviano describes Herr's depiction of the smell of the soldiers' shoes in Vietnam. The title could also be exhorting her readers to know her bloody words. Without knowing of the title's provenance, its effect is almost like a curse or reminiscent of the Old Testament, imbuing the text with an epic seriousness similar to that bestowed on *Gomorra* by its biblical title. The slippage from 'thoughts' in the original *Hamlet* quote to 'words' in the text's title suggests a desire to connect lived experience and language, to create a short circuit between her cognitive awareness of these events and what we are reading on the page. However, this is impossible; such direct communication is only a dream, like the one she relates to the Direttore: 'ho sognato un cavo USB che inserito nella mia nuca si collegasse alla tua, Direttore. Un cavo che attraversasse il Mediterraneo placido, e lasciasse fluire interi blocchi di vissuto, integrali e disorganizzati, nella tua testa' (99). Such reflections also bring to mind the gap between signifier and signified at the centre of post-structuralist theory, again undermining an alleged end of postmodernism by bringing to the fore the unbridgeable gap between language and reality.

*Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, like *Gomorra*, is a book that deliberately resists easy categorisation. Jones told Genna (2007c) in an interview: 'ho intrecciato fatti reali e fiction [...] Volevo un testo denso, tachicardico, che mandasse in frantumi le regole del



gioco, che potesse innestare epica, storia medievale e reportage, autobiografismo, narrazione, finzione'. The narrator highlights again and again throughout the narrative that it is not a straightforward novel, often using conditionals, the subjunctive mood underlining its doubtful status: 'Se questo fosse un libro', she repeats over several pages (99-102), or later: 'Se queste pagine fossero un reportage, un romanzo o un saggio, se fossero un libro' (102). Jones seems to share Saviano's desire to avoid the text being relegated to a single genre, choosing the medium of an unidentified narrative object in order to create what Jones later defined as 'un testo che scatena domande' (Genna 2007c).

Besides the genres mentioned above, there is also the stylistically abstract final section, entitled 'Amletario', which comes after the main body of the text. It is based round six surreal monologues that move between Elsinore and Mitrovica to show the tragedy of events, searching for ways to work through and represent the horror. To return to Pocci's analysis of the performative function of language in *Gomorra*, here too the 'interdiscursive hybridity' (2011: 232) of the text appears to be a way of making what Jones is saying act in the world, attracting attention to the situation in order to change it. Jones refers to herself as 'il narrA(t)tore' (246) in the 'Amletario', and she is both trying to display something in front of her readers, her 'spettatori' (250), but also act on what has been happening in Kosovo, using literature to elevate the suffering she witnesses to something that will reach and affect a wider audience. She states: 'Un attore narrante rende nobile anche il più plebeo dei pisciatoli di confine' (247). There may not be anything noble in the dark descriptions she offers us throughout the text, but its nobility lies in the narrator's attempt to communicate the situation in a way that pushes people to engage with it, reframing the horrors in tragic dimensions inspired by Shakespeare.

Interestingly, the narrator carries Primo Levi's *I sommersi e i salvati* around with her, among other books, seeming to confirm Antonello's argument that Levi continues to be a model for twenty-first century *impegno* (2012: 123). She has Levi's powerful drive to communicate these horrors – at one point, her repetition of the words 'Non dimenticarti' (190) has incantatory resonances of Levi's poem 'Shemà' at the beginning of *Se questo è un uomo* – but she also has an awareness of the limitations of her gaze. She compares her snapshots – which are both literal photographs (although we never see them) and literary pictures of the situations she experiences – to Levi's tendency to depict the details at the extremes of human experience. She says of her camera:

Mi piaceva la funzione macro: si sposta attraverso i dettagli, inquadra microcosmi che si separano in fotogrammi più specifici, l'universo si scinde: quello che si dilata sul visore è una specie di esistenza all'estremo. Pensavo a Primo Levi: ne *I sommersi e i salvati*, spiega che i lager non erano un buon osservatorio; era raro, sostiene, che i prigionieri potessero acquisire una visione d'insieme di quel che stava accadendo; talvolta non conoscevano nemmeno il nome del campo in cui erano stati condotti, né conoscevano gli altri campi, anche se posti a poca distanza; non erano in grado di valutare la misura della strage che si stava svolgendo. Noi siamo nella stessa condizione. All'inizio adottavo la funzione macro per questo: per vedere, della guerra, solo gli elementi particolari spinti al limite ultimo; se non posso avere uno sguardo d'insieme, restringo fino al dettaglio più inumano (114).

Jones is engaging with the aporia of historical knowledge that Agamben discussed in reference to Levi, Auschwitz and testimony: 'la non-coincidenza fra fatti e verità, fra costatazione e comprensione' (1998: 8). She may only be able to capture fragments of what she sees, but these can be pieced together and illuminate something more general both about

the nature of this conflict and also about the difficulties of representation. We can see *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* in terms of Tricomi's comparison of the viewpoint in *Gomorra* with a telescope (2008: 190); Jones' text too seems to focus on micro-details, but simulatenously opens out to considerations on a macro-scale.

The 'indicibilità' (179) of what the narrator witnesses is a constant trope of the text, as she repeatedly comes up against the limits of words and testimony. As Wu Ming 1 points out in the Memorandum, the book is openly 'un fallimento' (2009a: 43), as Jones herself repeatedly brings up her failure to fully communicate the reality of the things she sees. She comments, for example: 'Raccontarlo, però, è impossibile' (31), or 'Cerco parole' (38). Fulginiti rightly states in relation *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*: 'se il NIE rappresenta il ritorno a una fiducia nel linguaggio, e nella capacità di fare cose con le parole, si tratta di una fiducia pur sempre provvisoria, e tutt'altro che trionfalistica' (2009: 3). Indeed, there is an ever-present sense of disintegration, fragmentation, even what could be called a balkanisation of language, as the narrative seems to be an attempt to describe the war with her words, and, at the same time, inscribe it onto them. At the beginning of each of the seven days in Mitrovica, there is a page of a notebook, showing barely legible handwriting, crossed out and underlined, where we can find traces of what we are about to read. The presence of these pages of course brings the physical act of writing to our attention, partly perhaps as a piece of evidence that she 'really' did go there and write about it (although we have no guarantee that this is her notebook from the time or if it was fabricated afterwards), but it also demonstrates the way such writing can be edited, transcribed and transformed into the neater printed version. Yet, even the printed version indicates the difficulty of communication, at times with crossed out words – '~~Jasenovac / Marija Bistrica (Croazia) / Kosovo~~' (220) – or a lack of punctuation – 'Mitrovica è una città priva di caffè zucchero farina riso sapone detersivi cerotti quaderni a righe e a quadretti lacci da scarpe biscotti burro sigarette' (134) – or

contamination from other languages: Russian, English, Serbian, Arabic. The main body of the book ends by illustrating the difficulties of representing Jones' subject matter with a final unfinished sentence: 'se questo reportage fosse un libro, alla fine legger' (239). Like the black pages in Genna's *Hitler* (2008) bringing to the fore reflections on what a writer can, or should, imagine, Jones' text employs physical indicators of the problems and limitations of the word in accessing the truth.

Whilst Jones' narrator engages with documentation, which she carefully footnotes at the end of each fragment, she tells us when introducing the bibliography at the end that the secondary material 'è invocato medianicamente o inserito con metodo burroughsiano' (255). The text is thus a cut-up of different elements, jumping between styles and media as it jumps between different time frames, recalling another famous *Hamlet* quote: 'The time is out of joint' (act 1, scene 5, 188). The readers must sometimes work hard to follow the narrator's disjointed flow of words. We are invited in the footnotes to follow links to further information online, another instance of Jenkins' 'content streaming' (2006a: 243), and, at one point, there are even swathes of code to decipher (120-125). As with the other New Italian Epic texts I have analysed, readers must actively participate in interpreting and constructing the narrative; they cannot simply sit back and relax as the narrator reveals a fixed and already deciphered reality.

Despite a strong sense of *impegno* to talk about what is happening, Jones undermines the truth status of her narrative in a much starker way than Saviano's narrator in *Gomorra*. She asks questions such as: 'cosa è vero e cosa è falso [...] Cosa scrivo?' (16). Before the book even starts, at the bottom of the publication information page and so small readers could almost miss it, there is the familiar caveat that these events are 'frutto dell'immaginazione dell'autore', but she goes on to say: 'si riferiscono [...] a un "ambito mitologico" che nulla ha

a che vedere con la “verità storica”, intorno alla quale questo romanzo elabora una pura fantasia’. Then, on the page opposite the dedication and quote from *Hamlet*, there is a ‘Tabella dei contenuti’, in which Jones quantifies elements such as ‘Immaginazione personale’ (29%), ‘Incubi / Sogni / Allucinazioni’ (3%), ‘Ricordi d’infanzia’ (68) and ‘Pagine tagliate in fase di editing’ (1511). ‘Verità’ only makes up twelve percent. Whilst such questioning of the type of knowledge the text can give its readers is also present in *Gomorra*, there it is largely hidden or downplayed, whereas Jones is overt in bringing epistemological questions to the fore of her *quasiromanzo*.

The reference to myth in Jones’ *avvertenza* recalls what Wu Ming 1 theorised in the Memorandum in relation to mythopoesis and the New Italian Epic, although Jones’s subsequent distancing of her work from ““verità storica”” may limit identification with what Wu Ming 1 says. Nevertheless, Jones does explore how myths are made and how they can influence collective memory in a way that has some bearing on history and truth. In her brief fragment on the Battle of Kosovo Polje (26-28), which marked the beginning of five centuries of Ottoman domination in the Balkans, she explores how this ‘mito fondatore della storia serba’ was transmitted from generation to generation ‘dai bardi, sotto forma di canti o di poemi’ (28n1). This shows how the past conditions the present, as well as demonstrating the role of writers in forming the collective consciousness. There is a mythical or epic quality to Jones’ narration too, in its orality, for example, as analysed by Fulginiti (2009), or in the way her experience recalls a Dantesque journey through hell – and Dante is directly mentioned in the ‘Amletario’ (249) – or in the sometimes universal nature of what she relates – she tells us: ‘Mitrovica è ovunque sappiano le parole di sangue’ (240). Despite assertions in the *avvertenza*, we do seem to be encountering a mixture of historical fact and mythical or epic elements.

Alongside these elements, she is also telling a personal story, as once again we have Wu Ming 1's formulation of 'introspezione e autofiction per narrare un fatto pubblico e "storico"' (2009a: 15n9). Jones' narrator says more than once that this is *her* war (61, 82, 187). We hear personal details about her dreams and her menstruation, and, arguably, we are encouraged to imagine that she might be the naked woman whose wrists are bleeding on the text's front cover. Aside from suggesting the ethical drive behind communicating experience that Italian feminist theorists have explored, mentioned earlier in this chapter, Simonari (2008) points out that the 'parole di sangue' of the title could be related to Cixous' idea of *écriture féminine*, transforming female experience into writing. It is interesting that Jones chooses to focus mainly on the women she is holed up with in Mitrovica; like other New Italian Epic texts, these are marginalised characters, 'dalla parte sbagliata della storia', as the blurb of Wu Ming's *Manituana* puts it, or as Jones puts it: 'Sbalzati fuori dalla Storia' (37). Indeed, in an interview, she framed her protagonists precisely in terms of subalternity: 'Voglio scrivere di quel che non si scrive, di quel che raramente si può dire: i mutilati, i paria, gli esclusi, i caduti. E le donne' (Genna 2007c). Cixous states that woman 'writes in white ink' (1985: 251), relating female discourse to mother's milk, but Jones' text drips with blood, her own and that of those suffering that she depicts.

Such straying from objectivity puts Jones' text at risk of the type of controversy Saviano has experienced, although her more tentative attitude to the realism of her narration would seem to sidestep this. Cortellessa expresses surprise that the text has not been more roundly condemned, given 'la protervia revisionistica su una storia della quale deliberatamente sceglie di raccontare solo alcune vittime', and he even accuses her of '[un] disgustoso razzismo islamofobo' (2011a: 538). This reaction seems a little strong, given the narrator's constant meditations on the difficulties of representing a powerfully subjective experience, and a refusal to adhere to a black and white attitude towards the conflict like that

displayed by the humanitarian aid worker she meets, who states: ‘Ci sono vittime e ci sono colpevoli’; Jones’ narrator replies: ‘No. Ci sono vincitori e sconfitti, e un banchetto in cui carnefici e martiri si scambiano troppo spesso di posto’ (62). Choosing to narrate the violence as experienced by the Serbian population does not equate with Islamophobia, but rather a desire to highlight that both sides are victims and both sides are perpetrators. Cortellessa finds her choice of referring to Hamlet and ‘il suo culto fosco e sanguinario della vendetta’ distasteful (2011a: 538), yet Shakespeare’s play is an apt choice in a world where historical wrongs lead to violent revenge and more bloodshed, and in which there can be no straightforward heroism. Whilst Jones shares the personal element of Saviano’s narration – as Cortellessa rightly points out, Saviano could similarly refer to his fight as *his* war (2011a: 539) – she is far from his frequently absolute stance on what is being related.

Significantly, in contrast to the narrator of *Gomorra*, Jones’ narrator reformulates Pasolini’s famous words into a series of emphatic negatives: ‘Io non lo so. Io *non* so i nomi dei responsabili, e *non* li so perché *non* sono un intellettuale’ (89). This difference in approach to Saviano can be explained partly by her more openly problematised attitude to language and its ability to expose what is happening. It could also be explained by the nature of the conflicts in the Balkans, which, like much (post)modern warfare, were characterised by disinformation and cover-ups to leave no trace of the violence. There is a clear example of this in the text when the narrator describes the Serbs who have disappeared:

Sono desaparecidos. Serbi scomparsi. Sono quelli che le milizie rapiscono: li sfigurano con ferri arroventati, tolgono loro ogni segno di riconoscimento, e li interrano qua e là. Perché le famiglie non li trovino. Perché nessuno sporga denuncia. Perché non rimangono prove (111).

In such a climate, it is not just the case that she does not have the proof, it is that perhaps nobody does. No wonder one of the narrator's interlocutors laughs at her mention of truth: “‘La verità nei Balcani?’” (218). Like Herr's Vietnam, this is a new type of war, one that is being fought in such a way that depictions of it must find new forms, no longer being able to rely on straightforward reportage. Moreover, the narrator might call it *her* war, but she is a foreigner in the Balkans, and thus has the limited perspective of an outsider, as she herself points out, and as illustrated by the fragmentary quality of what she relates. Thus, she may not ‘know’ or understand the whole truth. Another dimension of her disavowal of Pasolini's ‘Io so’ could be that she does not see herself as an intellectual, as she is a marginal and largely unknown figure on the cultural scene. Perhaps refusing the label of intellectual is part of a wish to encourage reflection on the masculinity that has traditionally been – and arguably still is – associated with it.

So who is Babsi Jones? She seems to be an elusive figure, another divergence from Saviano and his very public personal crusade. Throughout the text, she directs readers towards further fragments of narrative on a blog that has now disappeared and been replaced,<sup>231</sup> as has her website.<sup>232</sup> Traces of her remain online in videos on YouTube, one of which was created by Genna and is called an ‘installazione audiovideo’, featuring Jones’ voice reading another fragment of narrative against a black and white film showing a match burning.<sup>233</sup> Another again features only her voice, this time reading part of T. S. Eliot's ‘Ash Wednesday’ against the backdrop of various images, including a home video of what seems

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<sup>231</sup> See slmpds.net. Jones described it as ‘un’ulteriore stratificazione di livelli inediti’ (Genna 2007c), one reviewer referred to it as ‘un sito-labirinto di oltre 100 pagine’ (Sbancor 2007), and Cortellessa calls it ‘la sua “vera” opera’ (2011a: 537), but, unfortunately, it had already disappeared before I could access it.

<sup>232</sup> See [babsijones.typepad.com/babsi/](http://babsijones.typepad.com/babsi/)

<sup>233</sup> See ‘Babsi Jones – TRITTICO: Hamletmaschine – Amleto – Hamletmaschine’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIZdw6CfpWk> (accessed 07.08.15).



to be a war zone in the Balkans.<sup>234</sup> These give a sense that Jones is almost a performance artist, creating the spectacle surrounding *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* through various media, but then fading away into the background, like the ‘lost word’ of Eliot’s poem. In common with Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum, or Genna in *Italia De Profundis*, Jones chooses to reference Eliot, bringing to mind modernist questioning of existing forms and structures of knowledge, and, particularly relevant for us here, the desire of modernist writers to distance their work from the realism and enlightenment ideals that came before them. Eliot’s poem, like *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, has a sense of despair both about the darkness of the world and about knowledge being able to illuminate it: ‘O my people, what have I done unto thee. /Where shall the word be found, where will the word /Resound?’ (1969: 96).

Arguably, despite reflections on the limitations of language, and the author dissolving from view at the end of the text, Jones’ words do still resound. In stark contrast to Saviano, she leaves a question mark over what literature can do, and she may not be able to offer up proof in many cases, or fully communicate this reality, but she can communicate a powerful sense of experience. As Wu Ming 1 and Wu Ming 2 point out, Jones does still choose to use words despite highlighting her constant failure: ‘Nella sfiducia come condizione fondante, si decide comunque di agire, e addirittura di osare, di sperimentare. Ringraziamo Babsi Jones per “averci provato”, e anche per aver “fallito”. La sfera pubblica ha bisogno di “fallimenti” come questo’ (Wu Ming 1 2009a: 43n36). Despite its limitations, *Sappiano le mie parole* grabs attention and demands to be heard as much as *Gomorra*’s rhetoric. In keeping with the Italian tradition of unidentified narrative objects, the limitations of her text also do not seem to stop her from being able to approach some kind of truth. Jones said of the text: ‘Ci sono

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<sup>234</sup> See ‘La parola perduta\_Babsi Jones\_legge\_Eliot’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ij1czGIFNxl> (accessed 07.08.15).

molte menzogne, ma sono menzogne che conducono a verità; ci sono molte verità, ma i media mainstream ti diranno che si tratta di menzogne' (Genna 2007c). This statement could be applied to many of the examples of New Italian Epic texts that engage with 'realism'; their authors focus on events that have been covered up or ignored by the traditional media, but fictionalise to bring them to light, in a double and seemingly paradoxical movement that, once again, leads to Cercas' third truth (2011b).

Sciascia, when asked what the truth was, replied: 'È difficile dirlo. La verità si sente [...] Qualcosa di ineffabile. Leggendo le lettere di Moro, per esempio, sentivo di essere vicino alla verità' (1982: 230-231). The truth is for him, as I would argue it is for the writers associated with the New Italian Epic, something that is not easily defined, that can only be approached in various ways but never easily, or completely, encapsulated. In Jones' text, this difficulty is brought into the foreground, whereas in Saviano's text it comes in and out of view. Despite the problems of bearing witness, and despite possible controversies surrounding their work, both writers manage to make an impact on their readers, through their hybrid texts combined with transmedial elements, always negotiating between language and lived experience. They work against a culture of disinformation in the vein of a rich Italian tradition of *inchieste* combining literature and reportage, but also drawing on the American tradition of New Journalism and the non-fiction novel. Their work foregrounds individual, subjective, postmodern experience in order to make wider points about Italy and the world, bringing their readers, through emotional engagement, close to the reality they wish to portray, even if this reality resists representation, or a true return.

## ~ CONCLUSION ~

We have looked at the New Italian Epic, starting with the genesis of the label in Wu Ming 1's Memorandum, a document filled with fascinating ideas to be explored, but also containing some blind spots and limitations. A more in-depth examination of Wu Ming 1's periodisation revealed that important comparisons with, and influences from, migrant writers and the *giovani cannibali* in the nineties have been largely overlooked, and his emphasis on the importance of the G8 in Genoa raised issues about generational problems, nostalgia and modern-day experience, as seen in an analysis of texts portraying the protests, with particular focus on De Michele's *La visione del cieco*. Such generational anxieties about recent events resurfaced in our examination of fatherhood in the nebula, focussing on Genna's *Medium* and *Italia De Profundis*, and De Cataldo's *Nelle mani giuste*. The insistence in such texts on fathers and sons again means that productive dimensions are overlooked, in this case motherhood and female experience, attention to which would contribute to the wider picture of the nebula by reflecting on missing perspectives from the past – telling 'herstory' as well as history – and on the future. A survey of the two main strands of the New Italian Epic historical novels – represented here by Scurati's *Una storia romantica* and Mohamed and Wu Ming 2's *Timira* – followed by an analysis of the way in which the so-called 'new realism' works in the nebula in Saviano's *Gomorra* and Jones' *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue*, showed unusual configurations of fiction and nonfiction, documentary 'proof' and poetic licence, words and experience, and they could also be linked back to work by writers such as

Manzoni, Pasolini and Sciascia, as well as to previous innovations related to microhistory and to New Journalism.

Perhaps the thread running through the three key themes addressed in this study – fatherhood, history and reportage – is the presence of absences, folds or gaps. From confronting the absence of real or metaphorical parents, to considering the possibilities in the folds of history, to negotiating the gaps between words and experience, there is a sense in the New Italian Epic of writing in / from / through the interstices. Tensions exist but are never firmly resolved, as these writers invite their readers to engage with them, to enter the gaps, or to seek out material that will help consider different possibilities for filling the gaps. However, there is also often a gap between what is said about these texts and what they actually seem to be doing. This is shown by the insistence on the label of ‘epic’ for texts that are allegedly new and certainly experimental, or by proclamations of the end of postmodernism whilst incorporating postmodernist elements, or by Wu Ming 1’s conception of the *sguardo obliquo*, suggesting exciting potential for different viewpoints that are not always present in the New Italian Epic corpus. There are still gaps to be filled concerning non-white, non-male and non-middle-class viewpoints and experience in a phenomenon that purports to question dominant narratives. I have attempted to suggest ways of filling these gaps, and of considering these questions from different angles, whether by trying to think through concepts like epic, postmodernism, *impegno* and realism, or by calling into question Wu Ming 1’s national narrative of periodisation, or by moving away from a focus on fatherhood to consider motherhood or even posthuman perspectives.

Through the issues raised and discussed in this study, I have sought to establish that the New Italian Epic phenomenon deserves a place on the map of Italian culture, and, indeed, of a wider twenty-first century culture. Not only are the characteristics we have seen in the

texts analysed in this study present in texts from other national literatures, they are also not limited to literary production. There are many film-makers in Italy and further afield whose work engages with the key elements of the New Italian Epic phenomenon. Some of those interviewed as part of *Allegoria*'s special issue on the 'ritorno alla realtà' (see chapter five) have engaged with the concerns we have seen in this study, such as Francesca Comencini, who has made a documentary about the G8 in Genoa, *Carlo Giuliani, ragazzo* (2002), and Guido Chiesa, who directed *Lavorare con lentezza* (2004), a film about Radio Alice for which Wu Ming wrote the screenplay, as well as a film adaptation of Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny* (2000) about the Italian Resistance, from which Wu Ming borrowed the character of Ettore for 54. Nanni Moretti might be another film-maker whose work could be compared to the New Italian Epic project, combining postmodernism and *impegno* (as analysed by Barotsi and Antonello 2009), sometimes through an autofictional lens, and engaging with the problems raised by the end of the First Republic in films like *Palombella rossa* (1989) and *Il caimano* (2006).

Alina Marazzi could also be a relevant comparison: her autofictional, collage films explore political and ethical issues through personal, individual stories, and blur reality and fiction in a comparable way to the texts we have seen here. Wu Ming 1 has also drawn parallels with Marazzi's work, as well as with Marianna Schivardi's film *Il grande fardello* (2010b: 8), and Recalcati analyses Marazzi's *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (2002) and *Tutto parla di te* (2012)<sup>235</sup> in his recent book on inheritance and motherhood (2015: 174-7). When Marazzi visited the University of Warwick in January 2014,<sup>236</sup> I asked her if she saw such parallels,

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<sup>235</sup> *Tutto parla di te* is also interesting from the point of view of transmediality used as a community function, given that Marazzi created an online project on maternity connected to the film, entitled *Tutto parla di voi*, which included women sharing their own experiences of motherhood; see <http://tuttoparladivoi.ilfattoquotidiano.it/> (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>236</sup> She was a University of Warwick Institute of Advanced Study Visiting Fellow, and took part in an event I helped to organise entitled 'The Past Before Us: Uses of History in 21st Century Italy', which also included the

and she answered that she could call her work ‘New Italian Anti-Epic’; as for others, the epic label is problematic for her. Whilst we saw in chapter one that epic has been understood in new and unconventional ways in recent years, and, in terms of the New Italian Epic, I defined it more as an epic quality, perhaps the missing or inchoate attention to motherhood and women’s experience more broadly in the nebula could be seen in terms of such portrayals being anti-epic, or anti-heroism, the expression of the experience and of the imaginary of those who are not, and do not necessarily seek to be, protagonists in history or in a (new) national story, but whose views nevertheless matter and promise to increase understanding. We saw this contrast in chapter five in an analysis of Saviano as the global superhero versus Jones’s ‘failed’ project.

The unusual configurations of fiction and nonfiction that we can see in the New Italian Epic (and in some of Moretti’s and Marazzi’s films) can also be seen in other recent documentaries from outside Italy, such as: Sarah Polley’s *The Stories We Tell* (2012), which explores her personal family history in a similar way to Marazzi; Clio Barnard’s *The Arbor* (2010), which tells the story of the late playwright Andrea Dunbar using actors lip-syncing the testimony of the people she interviewed; or even Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005), about the activist Timothy Treadwell, which Wu Ming 1 mentions in reference to Saviano’s approach to his material in *Gomorra*.<sup>237</sup> Herzog’s conception of ‘ecstatic truth’ as a way of

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writer Giorgio Vasta; see [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/ias/current/visitingfellows/2013-14dateorder/marazzi/marazzi\\_events.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/current/visitingfellows/2013-14dateorder/marazzi/marazzi_events.pdf) (accessed 07.08.15).

<sup>237</sup> He discusses a particular sequence of *Grizzly Man*: ‘Herzog si pone come argine etico tra lo spettatore e quello che (non) viene mostrato. Herzog si infila le cuffie, chiude gli occhi e ascolta (escludendoci) la registrazione della morte di Timothy Treadwell, il protagonista del documentario, sbranato da un orso nel quale Herzog non è Jacopetti, non sta girando un mondo movie, non vuole fare exploitation, niente sensazionalismo, no: ascolta lui per noi. Per conto nostro, e per conto della migliore amica di Treadwell, che non ha mai avuto il coraggio di ascoltare quel nastro. Herzog diventa un “frangiflutti” morale, non rimuove il dolore ma evita di porporcelo in modo morboso. /Saviano fa una cosa diversa ma, tutto sommato, accostabile a quella di Herzog. Si “innesta” nel racconto e ti dice: “Guarda che queste vicende sono di carne e sangue, sono concrete, non sono cose lontane da te, da noi, io le ho viste, ero in quelle strade, e anche le volte che non c’ero è come se ci fossi stato, perché c’erano persone che conosco, e il loro esserci state ha cambiato anche me: quelle persone mi hanno prestato i loro occhi, il mio sguardo si è arricchito, eccoti il mio sguardo, eccoti questo molteplice”. L’io narrante diventa il Virgilio di una discesa agli inferi, ci accompagna, ci evita l’errore di fruire di quel dolore come di uno spettacolo, di un bene di consumo’ (Wu Ming 1 2010b: 7-8).

working against the ‘superficial truth, the truth of accountants’ that he associates with *Cinéma vérité* (quoted in Cronin 2002: 301) could in fact be a useful label to apply to the ways in which New Italian Epic writers approach reality, comparable to what I have discussed using Cercas’ term of the ‘third truth’ (2011b). Herzog states: ‘There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylisation’ (quoted in Cronin 2002: 301).

Unidentified narrative objects seem to be the order of the day, whether in literature, film, or transmedial texts. The recent growth in popularity and the success of genres such as autofiction, historical novels and literary journalism, as well as filmic docufiction, imply that the public is fascinated by Herzog’s deeper strata, by Cercas’ third truth, and not only in Italy, where such mysterious and elusive portrayals of reality have a long and rich tradition.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha describes the end of the twentieth century as the ‘beyond’:

Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the ‘present’, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism...

The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past... [...] in the *fin de siècle* we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’ (1994: 1-2).

In the new millennium, we continue to inhabit and explore this beyond, this moment of transit, these “‘in-between” spaces’ (Bhabha 1994: 2). This is expressed in the way in which the narratives we have seen in this study work across boundaries: across media, across genres, across national traditions, across time periods, and across fiction and non-fiction. We have seen the disorientation or disturbance that such complex figures can provoke in our ‘post-’ situation. Yet, Bhabha also sees the in-betweenness of the beyond as ‘the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself’ (1994: 2). It is thus precisely through hybrid, shifty, unidentified narrative objects that the New Italian Epic can address the areas that Bhabha outlines, and that we have seen throughout this study: ‘elaborating strategies of selfhood’ through the use of autofiction that connects to wider, societal or communal experience; acting as one of these possible ‘innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation’ in terms of form and content, through convergence culture and new forms of transmedial and transnational collaboration that address notions of collective political action and of cultural conflict; ‘defining the idea of society itself’ through this social action fuelled by interactive technologies and the forums they create, as well as through revised envisionings of the past and present that include or privilege perspectives that have been conventionally marginalized, and that aim to shape the future.



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